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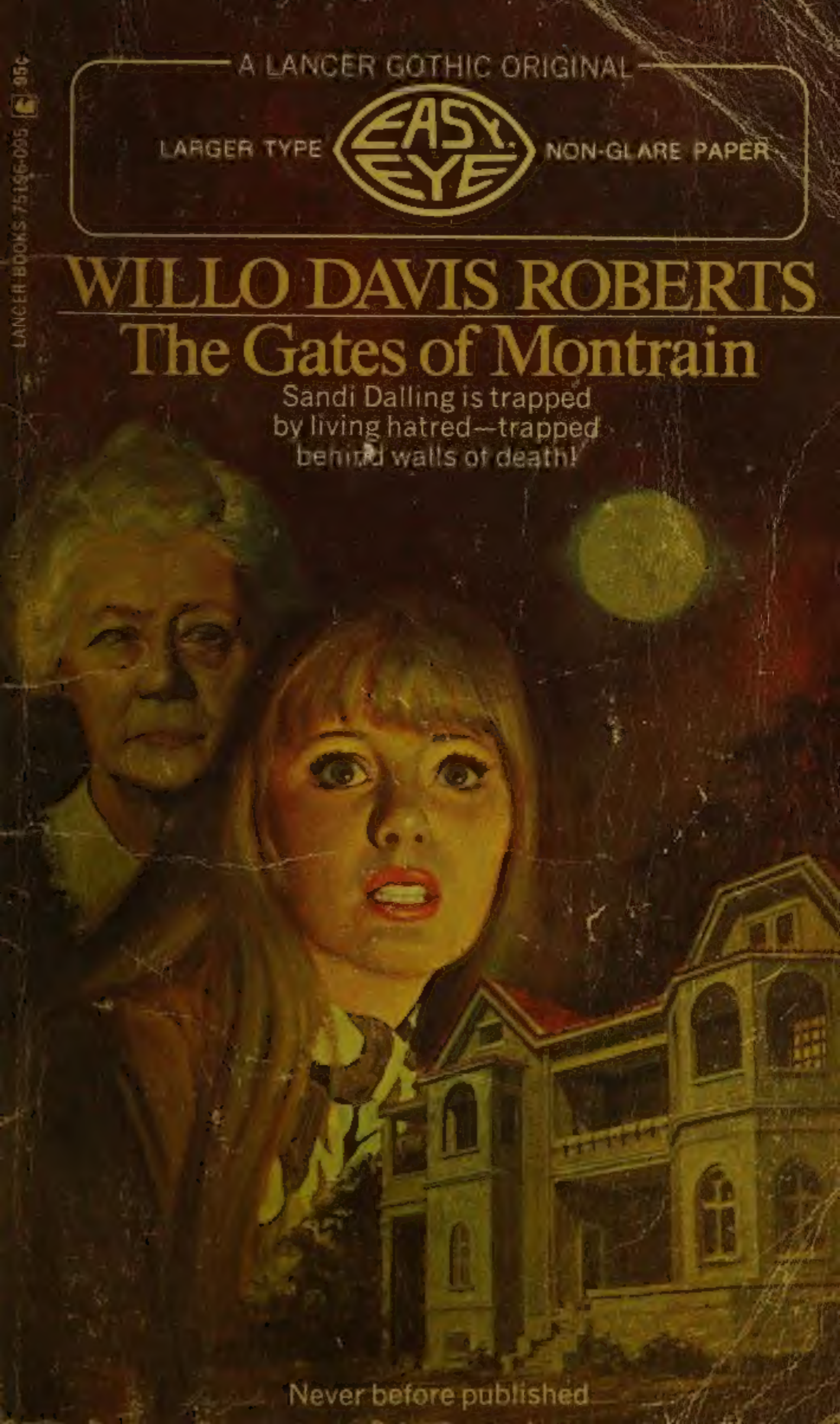
WILLO DAVIS ROBERTS

The Gates of Montrain

Sandi Dalling is trapped by living hatred—trapped behind walls of death!



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DEADLY WARNING

The night was warm, the tiles around the pool retaining some of the day's heat. I poised on the edge of the pool, then dove and swam across the width of it.

The water was warm, too, and it was strangely exhilarating to swim at night. I started the swim back across the deep end when, without warning, suddenly the lights went out.

For a moment I forgot to stroke, and got a mouthful of chlorinated water. I began to tread water, trying to make out something in the surrounding darkness.

"David? Are you there?"

I could see nothing. The water now seemed cold and I felt goose bumps rising on my arms. I thought I heard a small sound behind me, and called out again, "Is that you, David?" There was no answer . . . and then a hand closed firmly around my right ankle and began to pull me down into the pool . . .

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WILLO DAVIS ROBERTS

The Gates of Montrain

LANCER EASY EYE EDITIONS

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A LANCER BOOK

THE GATES OF MONTRAIN

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There was no indication that the job was to be in any way unusual. Mrs. Arlie handed me the papers, smiled, and commented that this was for a period of one month and might prove interesting. Interesting! Well, that might describe what happened to me, but it was a bit of an understatement.

"Dr. Campton has such a pleasant telephone voice," Mrs. Arlie said. "If he's as nice as he sounds, you won't have any problems."

At that point in my life I had no idea what problems were. Not really. I glanced at the slip she had given me. "Dr. Campton? What sort of doctor is he?"

"I don't know, I'm sure he didn't say. He wanted a girl who was a good typist and could spell. I told him Sandi Dalling was one of our top girls. Check in with us when you finish this one, Sandi; we're being swamped with requests for girls, and it's so nice to send you on a job. We never get any complaints

about you." She smiled again, and waved me on my way.

I went out into the bright sunshine and crossed the street to my car. The address she had given me was in one of the plushier office buildings, out near St. Mary's Hospital. A medical doctor? I thought that building housed some doctors as well as lawyers and other professionals. I'd never worked for a doctor before, although I'd done almost everything else in the secretary-typist line.

I had been feeling just a bit sorry for myself. After nearly two years of an informal engagement to Bruce Calhoon, we'd decided last night to call it off, and while my heart wasn't exactly broken I couldn't help thinking of all the evenings ahead with nothing to do. But Southern California on a fine summer day was proving too much for me. As I drove my spirits rose for no particular reason, so that by the time I reached my destination I was once more reasonably cheerful.

I found the office with no difficulty. It was a suite on the second floor. *David M. Campton, M.D.* it said in neat gold letters. And under that, *Internal Medicine.*

I let myself into the outer office and paused, impressed. Blue-green carpeting, stunning walnut furniture . . . it looked like an oversized living room rather than a doctor's waiting room, except for the discreet sign that requested one to register at the window in the far wall.

I walked to it and peered in, but there was no one in the efficiently equipped office. I hesitated, cleared my throat, and wondered if I should call out. The carpeting was thick and muffled my footsteps, so that no one would have heard me enter.

"Hello?"

For a moment there was only silence, and then I heard a door close not far off.

The man who came through the doorway into the waiting room was probably ten or twelve years older than I was, I decided, turning to face him. Big . . . six four and a trim two-hundred and ten pounds, I estimated. Thick, fair hair, only a little darker than my own. Direct gray eyes that appraised me as I was appraising him, without apology.

"Hello. Are you the girl from the agency?"

"Yes. Sandi Dalling. Are you Dr. Campton?"

"Right. Come on in, we'll talk in my office. Sorry everything's such a mess around here." He held open the door for me to precede down the carpeted corridor. Everything was in perfect order so far as I could see. "My regular girl started her vacation yesterday, and my nurse had an emergency cholecystectomy last night. I'm trying to clear out what I'll need. Right in here, sit down, Miss Dalling." He indicated a chair in front of the massive desk, and as I sank into it his eyes dropped to my left hand. "It is *Miss*?"

"Yes," I admitted, with the briefest of regrets for what might have been between Bruce and me.

"I guess they told you at the agency what I need. A girl to transcribe my dictation for the month my regular girl is on vacation."

I felt a faint stirring of alarm. "Mrs. Arlie didn't say it was *medical* transcribing. I'm afraid I'm not qualified for that."

"You'll have a medical dictionary to look up the unfamiliar terms, and we'll be working at a leisurely pace." He brushed aside my uncertainties with the

wave of one large, well-kept hand. "Technically, I'm on vacation, so there won't be the regular office dictation. However, I'll be seeing the patients I have in the hospital, and I have a stack of charts to catch up on. You can work at your own speed. I'll be through here in about an hour. Can you be ready to leave that soon?"

"Leave?" I asked blankly. "Aren't . . . aren't we working here? In your office?"

"Oh, no, didn't Mrs. Arlie tell you? We'll be going out to Montrain. Bring whatever you'll need for a month. There'll be plenty of free time . . . there's a pool, tennis courts, that sort of thing. Give me your address, and I'll pick you up. No point in taking two cars, and you won't be needing yours."

"But I wasn't expecting . . . Mrs. Arlie didn't say anything about leaving town . . ."

"It's only about forty miles, but there's no sense in your driving back and forth. The way traffic is, you could use up half of every day. There's no problem about leaving, is there? No one you have to report in to?" The gray eyes were direct, discerning.

Certainly not Bruce any more, I thought. Well, what difference did it make? My mother certainly wouldn't care where I went; she was too busy with her own concerns, and she figured at the age of twenty-six I ought to be able to take care of myself. This man didn't look dangerous. Only interesting, although it wasn't likely that he was unattached. Not with his quiet good looks and, if this office was any indication, his income.

I gave him my address and noted that he didn't write it down; a man with a good memory, then. Al-

ready I was wondering if he were married, but that was one question the agency didn't encourage us to ask; it was not, Mrs. Arlie pointed out, a matrimonial bureau but an employment agency.

Still, a single girl who has just been more or less jilted by one man does give consideration to such things. Dr. David Campton was an extremely attractive man, and I was still speculating on his marital status when he picked me up.

He drove a new Lincoln, a pale blue creation that did nothing to dispel the impression I had of affluence. He stowed my luggage in the rear, with no comment about the quantity of it, and installed me in the front seat beside him. I liked his quiet competence in handling the car, the graceful way he handled himself; most of all I liked the smile he gave me, friendly and approving of what he saw.

Not that I was any beauty, but Bruce used to tell me I was the all-American girl . . . clear skin, brown eyes, honey-colored hair that I liked long and loose. A good if not spectacular figure, and I was making the most of it with a pale green knit shift. I returned the smile and he turned his attention to driving in the city traffic.

"I think you'll enjoy a month at Montrain. It's a lovely place, if you enjoy flowers and trees. It's rather more of a drive than I should make on a regular basis, but I can't bear the thought of living entirely in the city. I maintain an apartment here, where I have to spend a good deal of my time, but on vacation I'll stay at Montrain as much as I can. I try to spend all my weekends there."

I was prepared to enjoy Montrain, whatever it was

like. That's why I do temporary work: I enjoy new people, new locations, new situations. However, I was not even remotely prepared for Montrain or for the people there.

The name Montrain sounded vaguely familiar, although I couldn't place it. I settled back to enjoy the trip, if anyone can enjoy driving in freeway traffic, assuming that Montrain was some small town out in the valley.

We talked impersonally about the latest big murder trial . . . isn't there always a spectacular trial taking place in Los Angeles? . . . and the books we'd read recently and discovered similar tastes in authors and music. He'd be married, I thought, trying to start letting myself down now. Naturally, any man as good looking and as interesting as this would have been snapped up long ago.

I enjoyed talking with him, and the time passed more quickly than I'd have expected. When he suddenly swung the Lincoln onto a side road and announced that we were "here" I was almost sorry to have the trip come to an end.

There was a high white stucco wall, stretching further than I could see, and a massive pair of black wrought iron gates set into it; an intricate pattern of lacy design had the name spelled out across the top: *Montrain.*

Not a town, then, but the name of an estate. Why should it have sounded familiar? I straightened in my seat, looking eagerly about.

The car rolled to a stop and Dr. Campton honked the horn. About that time I began to wonder if I'd brought the proper clothes for such a place. A man

came from somewhere off to our left and inserted a key into the lock in the center of the gates, letting them swing inward for us to pass.

A locked gate! How dramatic, I thought, refraining from bouncing like a child because I thought it romantic. Idiotic as it seems now, I did not at that time consider that the purpose of the locked gates might be completely functional.

Once inside the grounds, I was immediately distracted by the beauty of them. Gently rolling lawns, perfectly manicured by the gatekeeper who also operated one of those riding mowers, trees and shrubs and flowers of every description. I'm no gardener, but I could recognize the fact that someone had spent a good deal of time, effort, and money on the grounds of Montrain.

The drive was composed of some crushed white shell material which crunched under the tires as we moved slowly around a wide curve. It must have been a quarter of a mile to the house . . . I wouldn't have believed there was room so close to the metropolitan area for an estate this size.

The house was on a slight rise, and I had the feeling I'd seen it before . . . used as a movie set, perhaps? Enormous, white stucco and wrought iron, red tiled roofs, chimneys, acres of plate glass shining in the morning sunlight. There was a glimpse of the promised pool . . . cool, blue-green . . . and then the house cut it off from view.

I thought of the simple summer dresses in my suitcases. This looked like a place where one would be expected to dress formally for dinner. He'd be married, I thought again, to some coolly beautiful blonde

with diamonds in her ears, someone with a frosty smile of condescension for the little typist who had come to handle the doctor's dictation . . .

"Never mind the luggage," David Campton said as the motor died. He came around to open the door for me and I got out, feeling somewhat numb. "I called, so they're expecting us. Come on in."

They might have been expecting us, but no one showed up to greet us. He opened the intricately paneled white door and ushered me into a spacious hallway that ran forever into the depths of the house. At the far end of it I could see, through glass doors, a bit of greenery and the glint of sunlit water. If this were the other end of that pool, it must be olympic sized.

There were fresh flowers everywhere. On low tables, in tall vases, reflected in narrow mirrors on either side of the doorway. A white painted stairway rose to the second floor; on both sides of us doors opened into spacious, sunlit rooms large enough to entertain hundreds.

"Hello! Where is everybody?" he shouted. For a moment I could hear nothing but a faint humming sound . . . air-conditioning, I decided . . . and then there was a shriek from somewhere above and a small boy came plunging toward us. My new employer caught him up, swinging him off his feet, and the child cried out in delight.

"Daddy! Has your vacation started yet? Can you play with me now?"

Married, I thought dully. Confound it, there went an interesting possibility.

The boy was deposited on the floor and turned to face me. "Miss Dalling, this is my son, Willie. Willie,

Miss Dalling is going to work with us until I go back to the office. Come and shake hands."

Willie looked to be about eight years old. He had his father's thick fair hair and gray eyes, but he was a thin, wiry little creature. The hand he offered was slightly sticky.

"Hello," he said politely, and then forgot me. "Come swimming with me, Daddy."

"Not yet, chum. Where's Gram?"

"I don't know. Shall I find her?"

"Do so," David Campton requested. "It was a warm trip . . . would you like something cold to drink, Sandi, or would you prefer coffee?"

The house was comfortably cool. "Coffee, I think, if it isn't too much trouble."

He led the way through the house and I followed, marveling. It could indeed have been used for a movie set. I wondered if it had belonged to a movie star, back in the early thirties when it was probably built. Polished oak floors, paintings that looked to me like originals or excellent reproductions, rooms with thick carpeting and rich furnishings, and everywhere the flowers.

The kitchen was approximately the size of our entire first floor at home—chrome, enamel, spotless tile, everything on a grand scale and obviously designed for major entertaining.

A strikingly pretty girl of about twenty, in a black and white costume that left no doubt she was employed as a maid, was sitting with her feet on the seat of another chair, enjoying a cup of coffee. She got up in some confusion when we entered, slipping into a pair of high heeled pumps.

If she had to wear those to work in, no wonder she needed to put her feet up. She flashed me an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you were coming, Doctor."

"No problem, Toni, we only want a cup of coffee. This is Sandi Dalling, who'll be doing my typing for the next month. There's a room ready for her, isn't there?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Let me get the coffee." She brought us two thick mugs, and we sat with her at the kitchen table.

Her name was Toni Segan, she was working her way through college, and she spent summers fulltime at Montrain, she informed me in the course of our opening conversation. She didn't know where Mrs. Montrain was, but she'd be glad to take me upstairs, if that was what the doctor would like.

"Sure, why don't you do that when she's finished her coffee? Take your time. When you've got her settled, bring Sandi back down to the study and I'll show her what we'll be wanting her to do, OK? You don't mind if I call you Sandi, do you? I like all my girls too well to be formal." His smile was as before . . . open, friendly. All my girls, he'd said. Well, that put me in my place and stopped the dreaming. I was just one more of the hired help.

He drank his coffee quickly and left me there in the kitchen with Toni. She was frankly curious, her small face tilted, her dark tumbled curls falling over her forehead as she asked about me.

"You don't have a permanent job?"

"No. I don't want one. I prefer this, meeting new people, going new places. Do you like it here?"

"It's different," she admitted candidly. "It's an interesting place to live, although they're a bunch of . . ."

Abruptly all expression left her face, and she stared past me so that I, too, turned to face the doorway.

The woman who stood there might have been sixty, but she was slim and straight and lovely. Her hair was blue white, simply but professionally dressed, and her eyes were a clear, cool blue. Her skin was unblemished and soft; it was only from close range that one could detect the inroads of time. She must have been stunning, thirty years ago, I thought, rising when Toni did.

She wore a simple pale blue dress . . . I wondered if it were deliberately color-coordinated with her hair . . . and a single strand of pearls. I didn't need to wonder if they were genuine, or to speculate upon the gems in the rings she wore, either. Her smile was formal rather than welcoming.

"This is David's new secretary?"

"Sandi Dalling," I supplied.

She inclined her head ever so slightly. "I am Mrs. Montrain. Toni will take you up to your room and see that you are comfortable. You may rely upon her."

"Thank you." Mrs. Montrain. What was her connection with David Campton? I wondered if I were expected to say something else, but nothing occurred to me. I enjoyed new situations, but this one was out of my line completely.

"I think Doctor is looking for you, Ma'am," Toni suggested.

"He's gone into the garden with the children, I believe; I heard their voices. Welcome to Montrain, Miss Dalling. I hope that you will enjoy your stay here."

Her voice conveyed the impression that this was the least of her worries, but she had been properly brought up to be courteous; I was just as well pleased when she excused herself to join David and the children.

I looked down at Toni from my superior height, though she wore high heels and I did not.

"I'm confused. Who is Mrs. Montrain?"

Amusement flashed in her dark eyes. "Don't let her hear you! She thinks everyone knows who the Montrains are."

"Maybe you'd better fill me in, then. What's her relationship to Dr. Campton?"

"He's her son-in-law. Seriously, you haven't heard of the Montrains?"

I shrugged. "The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it. Who are they?"

She would have told me, then, but at that moment the outer door opened and a little girl came in. She advanced steadily toward us and stared up at me.

"I'm Vanessa," she announced. I placed her age at about eleven, a skinny child with rather stringy fair hair and blue eyes too big for her face . . . not a beauty, not yet, but she might be, one day. She wore dirty shorts and a T-shirt on which she'd spilled something orange; her feet were bare and she curled her toes against the tile floor. "Daddy wants you, Toni. He said bring his bag; Willie has a nasty sliver in his foot. He said I could take Miss Dalling upstairs."

"Thank you, Vanessa," I said, trying for a friendly smile.

She did not return it, looking at me speculatively. Toni moved off to take the doctor his bag. We continued to stare at one another. I was becoming slightly annoyed . . . eleven is old enough to have some manners . . . when she brought forth a rather startling statement.

"My mother killed herself, you know."

If she were attempting to disconcert me, I was determined to disappoint her. I kept a bland face turned toward her. "Is that so?"

"Some things are hereditary. Do you think suicidal tendencies are hereditary?"

I wasn't able to control my blink. "I shouldn't think so. But I'm no expert."

"Daddy's an expert. He says no. Still, sometimes I've wanted to kill myself."

"Everybody has felt that way, one time or another," I told her.

Interest flickered in her thin face. "Really? Have you?"

"Once or twice."

She licked her lips. "Why?"

"Rather personal reasons." I hesitated, then decided this child wasn't trying to be smark alecky; she really wanted to know. "Once was when I was not much older than you I didn't have a date for a dance, and everybody else I knew was going."

"Didn't you get to go?"

"No."

"Did you think about how to kill yourself?"

"No, not really. Only that I wished I were dead. I got over it as soon as the dance was over and another dance came along, eventually."

"And did you get to go to that?"

"Yes. With a boy who was shorter than I was and had hair like a scrub brush."

She giggled, which changed her face completely. "Daddy said I was to take you upstairs. I helped decide which room. Are you anemic?"

Again I couldn't control the blink. "Not that I know of. Why?"

"You look rather pale."

"I work days," I told her, concealing my slight annoyance. "I don't have a chance to get out in the sun much."

"You can, here. Do you swim?"

"Yes."

"Good. Daddy said it was all right to ask you if you wanted to swim."

"After he's told me what my duties will be," I said firmly. "Will you show me my room now, please?"

That was my introduction to Vanessa, and Willie, and Mrs. Montrain. Not what I was used to, but not frightening, either. No, certainly not frightening. So why was I uneasy as I followed the child through the beautiful house?

Did I, as I thought later, feel the dark currents in this house from the moment I entered it? Or do I only remember it that way because of what has happened?

For Montrain, for all its beauty and apparent richness, was a house of evil, and I nearly died there. But that is getting ahead of my story, and I must tell it all —the story of Montrain, with its facade of loveliness and its core of envy and greed and hatred, which came so close to destroying us all.

2

It occurred to me, as I followed Vanessa along the carpeted second floor corridor, that if her mother had, indeed, killed herself, then David Campton was not married, after all.

I was extremely curious about this supposed suicide, but I could hardly bring it up again once the child had dropped the subject. How long ago had it been, for instance? Was that why the name of Montrain was familiar? Had I seen the story in the papers, when the child's mother had died?

"My mother's room is on this side of the house, too," Vanessa said, opening one of the white painted doors. "She liked looking over the pool . . . she loved to swim. It gets the morning sun. That's the only time the California sun is tolerable, Mama said. Do you like it?"

She stood aside for me to precede her into the room. Well, whatever the disadvantages of this job would

be, the living quarters could only be considered a plus. The room, like all the others I had seen so far, was very large and elegantly and comfortably furnished. The carpeting was pale green, the flowered draperies drawn against the morning sun were white and green and yellow, to match the spread and the slip covers. The fresh flowers were here, too, in bowls and vases, flooding the room with their fragrance, and they had been chosen with an eye toward the overall color scheme. An open door revealed a bathroom done in delicate shades of lavender and white, with thick purple towels and gold flecked mirrors.

"It's lovely," I murmured.

"That's the bathroom. My mother's room is on the other side of it, through that door. Of course nobody sleeps there, now. But sometimes I go in and look at her things. She had pretty things."

"Has she . . ." I paused, feeling that I should take advantage of this opportunity to find out something of the family background, yet reluctant to seem to pump a little girl. "She's been gone a long time?"

"Since last summer." She crossed the room with an odd little half-skip, and pulled the cord that caused the draperies to slide apart. I followed her and looked down over the swimming pool, which was indeed of olympic proportions.

David Campton was there at the edge of it, performing a bit of minor surgery on his son's foot, while Toni, the maid, stood by to assist.

"Early summer, it was. The twelfth of June. I can remember because the next day was Iona's birthday, and we were going to have a party." She banged on

the window, and the people beside the pool looked up; David Campton smiled and waved, then returned to his task. "We didn't have it, of course. But this year we did. It was smashing."

She was grinning in recollection, and I smiled in return. "Who's Iona?"

"My aunt. Mama's sister. She had two of them. Didn't you ever hear of the Montrain sisters?"

Montrain sisters. I repeated the name silently, then shook my head. "I can't remember. I'm sure I did, but the memory isn't clear."

"Would you like to see their pictures?"

Without waiting for a reply, she led the way through the elegantly fitted bathroom to the room beyond. Feeling a little guilty, but too curious to resist, I followed her.

This room was done in striking colors . . . stark white, vivid coral, a vibrant charcoal. There were no flowers here, but the vases remained as a reminder of the days when this room had been inhabited.

There were pictures everywhere. There was a folding screen which divided a small reading area from the rest of the room, and it was covered with glass. Under the glass were dozens of photographs . . . professional photographs . . . and I recognized the face where I had not immediately known the name.

I didn't need the autographed scrawl across the bottom of the picture that Vanessa handed me to say the name, now.

"Gayle Montrain. Of course. She was killed in an automobile crash, I remember. I saw her in several movies." She had been a starlet rather than a star, al-

though at the time of her death she had been completing a picture that was to have made her a star, working with one of the leading actors in the country.

"Everybody said it was a terrible tragedy," Vanessa told me, putting the framed photo into my hands. "She was so young and beautiful."

To have mothered this child, she must have been at least thirty when she died; in none of the pictures did she seem more than twenty . . . a fresh, untouched twenty. Luxuriant dark hair, deep blue eyes, and a wonderfully sweet face.

Killed herself? A woman of extraordinary beauty, with an attractive and prosperous husband, a son and a daughter, a home like this, on the verge of stardom and all that went with it . . . why would she have killed herself?

I had a sudden clear memory of David Campton's face. He must have loved her very much, I thought. A year ago . . . was he ready, yet, to be interested in another woman?

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror over the massive charcoal-toned dresser. What was I thinking? That I could compete with the memory of a woman like this, a genuine beauty like Gayle Montrain?

Not that there was anything wrong with my looks, but they were so ordinary. A common garden variety daisy, I decided, alongside the exotic orchid in the photograph.

"I don't look at all like her," Vanessa observed.

"Not in coloring," I had to agree, tipping the photograph and comparing it with the small face before me. "But I think there's something . . . through the

eyes, and maybe . . . yes, I think the shape of your chin is the same, too."

"Do you think so?" She turned to scrutinize her features in the mirror. "I think you're right. Do you suppose I might look more like her when I'm grown up?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised. You come from a very good looking family. I suspect you and Willie will take after the others, don't you?"

She gave herself a small, secret smile in the mirror and turned away. "Yes, all the Montrains are beautiful. But my mother was the most beautiful of them all. More beautiful than Iona or Iola, don't you think?"

She led me to another photograph. This one took up a major share of one of the panels of the unusual screen. Three sisters, alike in coloring with thick dark hair and deep blue eyes and creamy complexions, and Gayle was the loveliest of the three.

"Which one is which? Iona and Iola?"

A slightly grubby finger touched one of the faces. "That's Iona . . . she's the oldest of the twins. She and Mama danced together, when they were little girls. Iola never danced, but she and Mama sang together. Whatever they were in, Mama was part of it."

Of course, I remembered now. They had had a reasonably successful career as children, fading into obscurity with the onset of adolescence. Only Gayle had returned to the screen as an adult. What about the others, I wondered? How had they felt at being left out of it, then? What had *they* done with their lives?

"Where are they now? Your aunts, Iona and Iola?"

"Here, of course. This is where they live. Didn't I tell you? We had a birthday party for Iona. Everybody

wore long dresses and jewels and I got a glass of champagne and it made me sick. Daddy said it served me right for snitching, but I didn't, really. Iona said I could have a little. She had the most beautiful dress, all silvery, you know, so it sparkled when she moved."

Oh, great. I thought of my one long dress, a simple white sheath. But surely no one would expect the hired help to come equipped with formals. Maybe I wouldn't even be eating with the family, come to think of it.

Vanessa ran a hand over the frame of the photograph and sighed. "Well, I suppose I'd better take you down to the study. Someone will bring up your luggage soon, I think, and Toni will unpack for you if you like."

I recalled that Toni, before Mrs. Montrain had entered the room, had begun a sentence with interesting possibilities . . . "It's an interesting place to live, although they're a bunch of . . ." What, I wondered, amused. I suspected that it wouldn't have been complimentary, had she added that final word.

"All right, let's go down to the study," I agreed, and made a mental note of which door was mine, so that I could find it again.

Apparently the sliver-removing operation had been completed, for Dr. Campton was in the study when we arrived. No dark, somber room, this, but it was clearly his own. Massive, functional furniture, lightened by gold carpeting and draperies open now to the warmth of the day, sliding glass doors opening onto a terrace beyond which flowers grew in a cheerful profusion.

"Everything satisfactory?" he asked, smiling, and I

was once more struck by his personal warmth.

"Yes. It's a lovely house."

Perhaps I only imagined that his smile remained peculiarly static for a moment before he let it go altogether.

"Yes. This is where you'll be working. You're used to this type of transcribing machine, are you?"

I looked it over and found the latest in electric equipment. "Yes, I've used all these before."

"Good. These are the tapes, these are the charts. I'm sure you'll pick it up quickly by simply glancing through to see how my regular secretary does it. There's a medical dictionary, and I shouldn't wonder if Vanessa couldn't help you, if you get stuck. She's fairly knowledgeable. I don't think we're going to have an actress in that one, but maybe another doctor . . ." He teased her, pulling a strand of the long, fair hair.

She stared at him coolly. "He means I'm not pretty enough to be an actress."

"I don't mean anything of the sort. I mean you have too much in the way of brains to waste on anything that isn't vitally important. Not that entertaining isn't important, but in my opinion medicine is more so. Have I gotten myself off the hook, or are you going to sulk?"

"I never sulk," she informed him in an aloof manner. "Do you want me to stay and help Miss Dalling now?"

"No, I don't see any need to begin working until after lunch. What about a swim, Sandi? We're agreed we aren't going to be formal. Would you prefer that the kids call you Sandi, too?"

I agreed to that, and work was temporarily shelved in favor of swimming, which seemed an auspicious way to begin a new job.

We swam for half an hour in the marvelous pool, Dr. Campton and the children and I. As we were climbing out Mrs. Montrain came onto the terrace and stood looking at us. Her smile, when she viewed David and the kids, thawed somewhat, but I did not have the impression that it embraced me, as well.

"Olivia, you've met Sandi, haven't you?"

She inclined her blue-white head ever so slightly. "Yes, of course."

David was beautifully bronzed and muscular in a pair of plaid trunks. He heaved himself out of the water and turned to offer me a hand up.

"Olivia, in case no one explained it to you, is my mother-in-law. She runs this establishment. Ask her if you need anything."

I smiled a response, although I did not at the moment picture myself asking Olivia Montrain for anything. She was courteous but distant.

"We will have lunch in twenty minutes, if that is convenient," she said, and upon his approval she left us to return to the house.

"I hope it isn't fish," Willie said disgustedly. "I don't like fish."

"If it is fish," his father informed him quietly but firmly, "you will eat it, my lad. Can you find your way back to your room all right, Sandi?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure I can," I assured him, and did a quick drying job with one of the large towels provided for our use before hurrying through the house to the second floor.

I found the room and opened the door, then paused, wondering for just a moment if I had mistaken the door.

For the room was not empty. A woman was there, a small woman in a long sleeved lavender dress, a woman with flaming red hair in an elaborate, outdated style. I paused, shocked into speechlessness, for she was methodically going through my suitcase.

3

She turned with a bright smile, and I received my second shock. I had taken her for a young woman, but this face was ravaged, old. Older than Mrs. Montrain . . . seventy, perhaps? The incongruous red hair must be a wig.

She wore dangling earrings and a cluster of diamonds on her fingers. She smiled at me with an excellent set of dentures, too white and perfect to be her own.

"Hello. You're David's new girl."

I couldn't think of anything to say. She hadn't been helping to unpack my things, as Toni might have done; she had been going through them, sifting my underclothes and examining the contents of the luggage pockets. Yet she spoke as matter-of-factly as if she had come to bring me a batch of linens.

"I'm Silvy."

"How do you do," I said uncertainly. "I'm . . . Sandi Dalling."

"Sandi. How nice. You have lovely things. I like lovely things, don't you? They're always wanting me to give them up . . . these . . ." She extended her hands and the diamonds glittered as the light caught them. "I won't do it, though. They're my diamonds, my husband bought them for me. Do you remember my husband, Rudy?"

Somewhat numbed, I shook my head.

"Rudy Montrain. He was a director. One of the best." Apparently she didn't require responses, which was just as well. "We married brothers, you know. Olivia and I. You wouldn't know I was twelve years older than Olivia, would you?"

She smiled, her face a grotesque mask with makeup that cracked as the wrinkles formed. "Would you?" she insisted.

"No," I said, although it wasn't true. Olivia was a well preserved sixty. This woman looked much older.

"Oh, we were a pair, when we were young," she said with satisfaction. "The Golding sisters. Oh, we didn't sing and dance, like Gayle and the twins, but we were spectacularly attractive, in our day. Do you sing?"

"No. I'm a secretary-typist."

"Oh." Obviously that was too dull to be discussed. "I heard her bring you up here . . . Vanessa. Such a messy child. Not at all like Gayle. Gayle was always such a perfect little lady." Her face crumpled. "Gayle's dead, you know. She was in a terrible crash . . . her poor body was all smashed and bloody. I saw her. I

thought it would kill David. He loved her very much. But he's a young man, he'll marry again, no doubt. Are you married?"

"No."

She looked at me shrewdly, as if sizing me up as a prospective wife for poor David. Although I had been thinking along the same lines myself only a short time ago, it was now embarrassing.

"I thought I might marry again, when my Rudy died. But it isn't easy, to find another man at my age." I rather thought it wouldn't be. She put up a hand to touch the improbable red hair. "Do you like my wig? I have thirty-seven of them. This is one of my favorites."

"It's stunning," I said, with some truth. The woman was obviously mad, or at least senile. For the first time I wondered about that locked gate, if it served more purpose than keeping out prowlers and curiosity seekers.

"Would you like to try it on?"

In one deft motion she had removed the wig and offered it to me; for a moment I felt a choking sensation as if I'd been offered a head. It was clear why she needed the wig; her own hair was almost completely gone. Only a few white wisps covered the pink skull.

"No, thank you. I . . . I have to get dressed. I'll be late for lunch."

I snatched up my clothes from the end of the bed and fled to the lavender bathroom, locking the door on the off chance that she might follow me. I really thought someone ought to have warned me about Silvy.

She was gone when I came out, and the full allotted twenty minutes had passed. I hurried down stairs and wasted another five minutes locating the dining room.

David Campton was there, and Olivia Montrain, and both the children. The youngsters had been dressed in clean shorts and shirts, and they had obviously been waiting for me. I began an embarrassed apology, but David grinned reassuringly.

"Don't worry about it. It's a big house, and not easy to find your way around in. Come along, let's eat and then you can tackle the typing while I do some more dictating."

He was in no way critical of my lateness, but I was not so sure about Olivia Montrain. It was easy, now, to trace the resemblance between her and her daughters; she had been a lovely woman and was still so except for her reserved manner. Several times during lunch I caught her eyes upon me, appraising, cool.

Toni served lunch . . . fillet of sole cooked in butter, a tossed green salad, and butter-flake rolls hot from the oven. A simple meal, but satisfying, except to Willie who pushed the fish all over his plate and when no one was looking tipped most of it into the napkin in his lap. He caught my eyes upon him and stared at me defiantly.

It was none of my business, and I ignored him. Evidently he stuffed napkin and sole into a pocket, for he left no telltale debris at the end of the meal.

It was an interesting household, but I was glad to retire to the study and more familiar tasks. David gathered up his portable tape recorder, saying that he would improve his suntan while he went on to the next charts, and I could have the use of the study.

It was cool and quiet and I began confidently enough, for I was an excellent typist. It was somewhat alarming, though, to hear so many words that were unfamiliar to me. David spoke clearly and concisely, with approved dictating manners, so that for the most part I was able to find the words in the dictionary; however, it bothered me that I took so much time looking them up. This was going to prove more challenging than my usual assignments.

It was clear that as an internist David saw a good many patients on referral from other doctors. A major share of his dictation was devoted to what he called a complete physical evaluation. This included not only a detailed physical examination, but deep probings into past family and medical history, so that the report that went into the chart was often an absorbing and fascinating life story. I found myself impressed by the doctor's compassion and genuine concern for these people, and I was caught up in the problems he described in a way that had never been true of any previous job.

There was a fourteen year old boy with leukemia, who wanted to be a football player and would probably not live long enough to follow the games through the coming season. There was a young mother of two small children with arthritis so crippling that she could no longer care for them. And there was a twenty-year-old girl whose problems with colitis had made her husband decide he couldn't put up with her any longer, and he had abandoned her.

David cared about these people, above and beyond the physical problems he was trying to alleviate. I typed his dictation and learned a good deal about his

patients; I felt that I was learning even more about Dr. David Campton.

There was no question of finishing the stack of work he had given me; it would obviously take days to accomplish this. No specific quitting time had been mentioned, and in the late afternoon I began to wonder if someone would eventually come and tell me it was time for, at the least, a break.

I turned with relief when David came back into the room, bearing his tape recorder and another stack of charts with a corresponding belt of dictation.

"How about knocking off for a rest before dinner?" he said, and I pushed back my chair and stood up.

"What a good idea! Would I be out of line to suggest another dip in that lovely pool? Or is it too close to dinner time?"

"Oh, no, dinner won't be served until seven. You have a couple of hours. By all means, put on your suit, and I'll join you."

We stacked all the work on the big desk, and somehow, as I shook out the plastic cover for the typewriter, I managed to flick myself in the eye with a corner of the cover.

I made an involuntary sound of pain and put my hand to my eye; instantly David grasped my wrist to prevent my touching it.

"No, don't rub it . . . here, let me see."

We were standing very close together while he examined my eye; his back was to the door, and perhaps to the newcomer it didn't look as if our relationship was doctor-patient. I couldn't think of anything else to account for that chilly, controlled voice.

"Excuse me . . . I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

David didn't turn immediately, and I could not see her until he'd released me. "Scratched it, I'm afraid, but don't rub it; it will only irritate it further. If you can let a tear or two come it might help."

"That's easy," I said, for my eyes were watering. I accepted the handkerchief he offered to hold over the the slightly injured eye, and looked at the speaker with the other one.

Iona . . . or Iola? One of the twins, certainly. The same rich dark hair, although this was closely cropped rather than long and loose, the same dark blue eyes . . . a beauty. Older than the photographs, but a lovely woman only a few years my senior. She wore a tailored linen dress, short enough to display her legs to advantage.

David smiled at her. "Hello. Meet my new girl Friday, Sandi Dalling. Sandi, this is my sister-in-law, Iona Montrain."

I acknowledged the introduction, feeling somewhat foolish with one eye covered. Her smile was not deep enough to have any of the charm previously caught by the photographer.

"We're taking a swim; want to join us?" David said as he moved toward the hall.

"Why not?" Her look was frankly speculative. She turned away from me and slipped an arm through his. "I'll walk upstairs with you, Dave. I want to ask you about something."

They moved away from me. I finished covering the typewriter, decided my eye would survive if I let it open, and followed after them, up the wide staircase.

I was making points like crazy, I thought wryly. Certainly Iona wasn't jealous of my looks . . . quite the contrary . . . but it was clear that she was not enthusiastic about my presence here. Had she her own designs on David Campton?

Well, what would be more logical? He was an extremely attractive male, and if she were single there was no reason why a sister-in-law . . . a former sister-in-law . . . might not be interested.

I hurried in my undressing, but even so I was the last one at the pool. Iona was there, putting my trim one piece green suit to shame with the briefest of bikinis and a smoothly tanned expanse of skin. She not only looked better than I did, she swam better, too. The moment I reached the edge of the pool she challenged David to a race and they dove in, leaving me standing there. He beat her to the far end, but not by much, and they hung there, resting, laughing and talking.

Toni came out with a tray of drinks and we all sat on the tiled pool edge, dangling our feet in the water. Iona made me uncomfortable, and when I realized that it was precisely what she intended to do anger began to stir somewhere inside me.

So I was hired help, and she'd walked in when David was standing close to me . . . I was, in a manner of speaking, a guest in her home. David included me in their conversation in a completely natural manner, but Iona managed to shift her position so that I was behind her; she never addressed herself directly to me but kept her remarks rather oblique.

It was a relief when the children joined us, although they were noisy and showing off, demanding

our attention when they mounted the diving board, in general making pests of themselves.

I responded to Vanessa's shouts, and Iona used this as an excuse to cut me off altogether from the adult company. Her back was squarely toward me and she was in earnest conversation with David, so that neither of them saw Vanessa when she decided to go off the side of the board rather than the end.

I started an alarmed protest, but it was too late. The little girl jumped, rather than dove, and it appeared from my angle of view that she clipped her chin on the side of the pool. She went under and I was on my feet, for she was making no effort to bring herself to the surface.

It never occurred to me that either David or Iona was a better swimmer than myself, that I might have shouted and sent one of them after her. I dove into the cool, clear water, thrusting my body downward toward the bottom, which was where Vanessa was headed.

Her eyes were open, her long hair streaming above her; as I reached her I saw her mouth open and she swallowed water, her face without expression, stunned. She offered no resistance when I wrapped an arm around her small body and pushed upward with all my strength.

The moment we broke the surface she choked and gagged; I saw that she had a fairly deep gash under her chin which bled profusely . . . or was it only that diluted by water it seemed profuse?

I didn't have to call for help to get her out of the pool; David was there, lifting her out easily, stretching

her on the pale blue tile, where the water spreading under her head took on a reddish tint.

I had expended more effort than I'd realized; I had to cross the pool to reach a ladder and it took all my energy. However, by the time I reached the small group Vanessa was sitting up, choking and sputtering, and I heaved a sigh.

David tipped up her chin to look at it. "I should have been a surgeon, not an internist. That's going to take some sutures. You see now, love, why you've been told to go off the end of the board?"

"Is it going to make a scar?" Vanessa asked, rolling her eyes downward as if she might thereby be able to view the underside of her own chin.

"If it does, I assure you it will be a mark of interest," her father promised her. "Come on, let's get you patched up before dinner's ready, or Gram will be justifiably annoyed with us."

Willie had also climbed out of the pool and was regarding his sister with interest. "How many stitches are you going to put in her, Dad?"

"Five or six, maybe. Want to come along and assist?"

"Yeah," he agreed eagerly, and they moved toward the house.

I was left at poolside with Iona. She twitched at the top of her bikini. "You're a woman of action, Miss Dalling. I'm afraid David and I were engrossed in each other; she might have drowned if you hadn't seen her go in."

"Willie saw her, too," I pointed out. Did she want to make a point of how much she and David had been

engrossed in one another? Just in case I hadn't noticed she'd shut me out of the conversation?

"How long have you known David?" she asked unexpectedly. Her eyes burned into mine so that it took some effort on my part not to retreat from them.

"Why, I only met him this morning."

Her eyebrows rose in patent disbelief. "And already he's brought you home for an extended stay?"

I felt heat in my face. "I've been hired to work for a month, doing his typing."

"You're not friends, then."

"We've hardly had a chance to become friends, as yet," I told her, resenting her inquisitional manner.

Suddenly Iona smiled, and there was a trace of the charm that had been evident in all of her sister's pictures. "We'd better get dressed for dinner; I suppose that brat has spoiled the swimming for this evening. I don't suppose you play bridge, do you?"

I shook my head. "I'm afraid not."

Iona sighed. "It's impossible to get up a foursome. Well, I'll see you at dinner."

I remembered that elegant, formal dining room. "I wonder . . . Dr. Campton didn't say anything about coming prepared to dress for dinner . . . I didn't bring long dresses."

"Oh, wear any old thing," Iona said carelessly. "It doesn't matter in the least."

We parted in the lower hall, and I wondered how happy she'd be to see me appear in some dowdy rag while she showed up in silver lame or some such. Not that I had much choice, if she intended to compete on that level.

I didn't know just how little choice there would be.

For when I slid open the closet door to choose a reasonably becoming frock for dinner, I was frozen with shock.

Someone had been in my closet. The first two dresses I touched, among the nicer things I owned, had been slashed to ribbons.

I stared at the pale blue silk. Something sharp . . . a knife, a razor? . . . had been ripped time and again through the material of the bodice, until scarcely anything remained of it. A strand of silk came loose and fell across my bare foot and I stared at it, wondering what on earth sort of house I'd gotten myself into.

4

The rest of my clothes were untouched. With fingers cold, and not from the waters of the pool, I stripped off my suit and hung it to dry in the lavender bathroom.

Iona hadn't liked me, hadn't liked my being here; but she hadn't damaged my clothes. She'd been at the pool ahead of me; she'd left the same time I had. It was impossible to imagine the dignified Olivia Montrain doing anything so insane . . .

Insane . . . I paused, looking at my image in the mirror, startled to see the pallor of my face. Silvy? Had it been Silvy who had entered this room while I was gone and destroyed two of my prettiest dresses? But why? Even people who are mentally unbalanced have reasons for what they do, and Silvy had seemed to like me.

I put on the first thing that came to hand, which happened to be a pale yellow linen shift. Very simple, and I wore it unadorned. I had a few pieces of attrac-

tive costume jewelry, but I suspected the Montrains would appear dripping diamonds; I wouldn't even try to compete with that.

I didn't know what to do with the ruined dresses. I had invested over a week's salary in the pair of them, and I felt that I ought to be compensated for them. Only I was inexperienced in the art of walking up to my hostess and informing her that someone in her household had destroyed my clothes and asking what she intended to do about it.

I dropped the dresses over the foot of the bed and let myself out of the room. The house was quiet, although I sensed the presence of other people behind closed doors.

Vanessa met me in the lower entryway, proudly displaying five black sutures.

"You look pale," she said. "Are you sure you aren't anemic?"

"I'm sure," I told her. Could Venessa have had anything to do with what had happened? She had been in and out of the pool; I thought she'd been in and out of the house, too, although I couldn't be sure of that. She and Willie had chased one another all over the place.

"It wasn't the sight of blood, was it? You don't faint when you see blood?"

"No, I never have. I hope I'm not late for dinner."

"No, nobody's down yet. I had to put on a dress. Iona said it didn't seem right to wear diamonds to sit at the same table with a grubby child in shorts, and Gram said I had to wear a dress. I wasn't grubby, I'd been in the pool for an hour."

I thought of my costume jewelry and was glad I

hadn't worn it. "You weren't anywhere near my room while I was away from it, were you?" It had just occurred to me that the dresses might have been damaged during the afternoon, while I was working in the study, for I hadn't opened the closet since the things were put away.

"No. Oh, there's the telephone. I'll get it."

She skipped to the white telephone on the table midway down the hall and answered it quite professionally. "Montrain. Vanessa speaking." There was a pause. "Oh, yes, I'll call him." She lifted her face and covered the mouthpiece to speak to David, who was coming down the stairs in fresh slacks and a sport shirt, looking relaxed and comfortable. "Daddy, it's the hospital."

"Oh, hell, there goes my dinner." He took the receiver and spoke into it, all trace of annoyance vanishing when he spoke. "Dr. Campton here."

"At least three nights a week," Vanessa informed me, "the hospital calls just as we're ready to eat. He always gets cold leftovers when he comes home, or he's too tired to eat at all."

We waited, frankly listening to his end of the conversation, which was brief.

"All right. Admit him to C.C.U. The usual procedures to be followed. I'll be there as soon as I can."

He hung up the phone and flipped a hand at us. "Tell Gram to save me enough chicken for a sandwich, honey. God only knows when I'll be home. Don't feel you have to work during the evening, Sandi; enjoy yourself."

He was gone, leaving me in a household where ev-

eryone but the children seemed suspect, and I wasn't positive about them.

"What's C.C.U.?" I asked.

"The Cardiac Care Unit. Somebody's had a coronary, I guess. Come on, I picked the flowers for the table. Do you want to look at them?"

It was a beautifully appointed table. The dark mahogany gleamed, and there were individual lacy place mats, delicate china, heavy and elaborate old silver. Vanessa had chosen yellow roses, and their fragrance permeated the air. There were also candles, although it was not dark and there was no need for them to be lit.

The table was set for six. David, Olivia, Iona, Vanessa, Willie, and myself. What about Silvy? She hadn't appeared at lunch, either.

I might have asked about her, but it was too late, for Olivia Montrain joined us, regal in white lace, with a blinding assortment of gems at her throat and on her fingers. Iona was right behind her, and I couldn't repress a twinge of envy.

Iona wore coral . . . the same shade as had been used to decorate Gayle's room, next door to mine. It was marvelous with her tanned skin, her dark hair and flashing eyes. Her jewelry was less ostentatious, but no less stunning: more diamonds, I assumed, although I was no expert on precious stones. Her eyes flicked at me like little razors, taking in every detail from my simple hair style to my Italian sandals. Dismissing me.

"Where's Dave?" she demanded. Not of me, but of Vanessa.

"He had to go to the hospital. He said to save enough chicken for a sandwich."

"He's supposed to be on vacation," Iona said resentfully. "What kind of a vacation is it, when he keeps on seeing patients?"

Olivia touched a spoon, replacing it with a small frown. "You know how he feels about his patients. And he will be getting more rest . . . he won't be going to the office, only to make hospital rounds once a day."

"And seeing the emergencies. That's all he ever has, emergencies. He needs a real vacation, to get away, relax completely, do something different . . ."

Olivia looked at her daughter . . . a speaking look, although I could not read it. "You know there are reasons why . . . he cannot go away. Well, if David isn't here I suppose I might as well tell Toni to begin serving. Where's Willie?"

"I'll find him," Vanessa volunteered, and we heard her feet running on the polished oak flooring of the hallway.

Only a few minutes later . . . awkward moments during which no one spoke to me and I had nothing to say to them . . . we heard footsteps returning.

"Come on, let's eat," Iona said, but it was not Vanessa or Willie who appeared in the doorway.

It was Silvy, in her same long sleeved lavender dress, but she no longer wore the elaborate red wig. This one was silvery blonde, in a shoulder length style intended for a girl in her teens or twenties; the effect was ludicrous and, in the light of my slashed clothing, rather frightening. Surely no woman in her right mind

would pair that wig with that face. Had it been Silvy in my room?

"Silvy!" Mrs. Montrain uttered her sister's name involuntarily. "What are you doing downstairs?"

"I came down to dinner, of course. I get tired of eating alone. Besides, Emma was tired. Too tired to come downstairs for my tray." She smiled at me, those too-perfect teeth gleaming. "Hello. I've forgotten your name. Sally? No, Sandi." She was pleased to have come up with it. She turned her smile on Iona. "This is David's new girl, you know."

"I know." Iona's voice was carefully expressionless. "Mother, are we going to eat or not?"

For a moment the other woman hesitated; then she motioned toward the table. "Certainly. David isn't here, Silvy, you may sit in his place."

Silvy slid into the chair, grinning at me in an impish fashion. "I don't think they send the same food up to me as they eat down here, you know. Economizing, always economizing . . . but never where it shows, you see.

Dull red mottled Olivia Montrain's face as she took her own place. "Silvy, if you're going to eat with us, the least you can do is behave yourself. I'm sure Miss Dalling isn't interested in your silly comments."

"I'll bet she is," Silvy said, undaunted, and unfolded a linen napkin across her thin knees.

I was watching Toni when she came in with the first platter; I saw her start at the sight of Silvy. I must talk to Toni about her tomorrow when no one else was around. She would know whether or not Silvy was capable of the destruction I had found in my closet;

she might advise me as to what steps to take to prevent further such damage.

The children arrived, breathless, as Toni was serving the soup. It was something different than I was used to; I was startled to find that it was cold. I raised my eyes to find Vanessa watching me.

"It's gazpacho," she volunteered, revealing my ignorance. "That's Spanish. Gram makes lots of Spanish recipes."

"It's delicious," I murmured truthfully. Mrs. Montrain did the cooking herself? Come to think of it, I hadn't seen any servants in the house except Toni, although Silvy had mentioned someone named Emma who might be a servant, also. It was a large house, a good sized household. Did Olivia Montrain handle the entire kitchen end of things alone?

The meal was excellent. I longed for David's presence, to ease the strangeness of the minutes when no one spoke, for I did not feel that the silence was a comfortable one. Silvy ate heartily, and I couldn't help wondering if there were any truth to her statement; I was immediately ashamed of myself. Obviously the woman was off balance, but I couldn't imagine David countenancing any such thing as feeding an old woman inferior food in the attic, which was what she had implied.

"You going to marry David?" she asked abruptly, during one of the deadly silences.

I had a mouthful of the richly seasoned chicken; I choked and reached for the glass of ice water beside my plate.

"Silvy," her sister said heavily, "I told you. If you're going to come downstairs, you must behave

yourself and not embarrass people. Miss Dalling is David's temporary secretary. She is only here for a month, until Miss Thole gets back from her vacation."

"Somebody ought to marry David," Silvy said, expertly stripping the meat from a thigh bone with her teeth. "He's a lonely man."

"Gayle's only been gone a year," Olivia said coldly.

"A year . . . that's long enough for him to begin to be interested in someone else," Iona said, but I knew she was not speaking of me.

"Someone's missing," Silvy said, looking around the table, abandoning the subject she had introduced. "Where's Iola? Maybe David will marry Iola."

"Maybe he won't," Iona said, and although her voice was quiet and controlled I could tell the suggestion angered her.

"Where is she?" Silvy persisted.

"She's working," Olivia stated flatly.

Silvy brightened. "You mean someone besides David has a job now? You mean you won't have to take my diamonds?"

There was silence for a moment, although I couldn't tell from their reactions whether or not there was any truth in the suggestions Silvy was making.

"*I* have a job," Iona informed her. "I have had, for some time."

"Making that junk jewelry," Silvy said, dismissing it contemptuously. "Well, I'm not going to trade mine for any of that stuff you make."

Of their own volition, my eyes went to the stones at Iona's throat. They looked real to me, but I was no expert.

Iona's face was suffused with color. "Mother, for heaven's sake; do we have to put up with this? Where's Emma? She's paid to look out for Aunt Silvy, why isn't she doing it?"

"Because," Silvy said gleefully, "she can't. She can't, she can't, she can't."

This time the silence stretched on too long; it was a relief when Willie asked innocently, "Why can't she, Aunt Silvy?"

"Because," Silvy said, "I locked her in the bathroom. She said I was a bad girl, because I'd gone out of my room without her this morning. She locked me up all afternoon, to punish me. As if I were a naughty child! Well, she made a mistake, at dinner time. And this time *she's* the one who's locked in. Serve her right, she won't get any supper. Is there any more chicken?"

I was scarcely aware of the Montrains and their mortification, deserved or not. If it were true, if Silvy had really been locked up all afternoon, then who had slashed my dresses?

5

Willie was dispatched to the second floor to free the unfortunate Emma. Emma proved to be a woman in her middle forties, gone rather soft and flabby, unfashionably dressed in an old style housedress and carpet slippers. She apologized volubly.

"I'm sorry, Miz Montrain. I oughtn't to have given her the chance, but I thought she was still taking her nap. She moves faster than you'd expect, sometimes."

"You're paid," Iona said uncompromisingly, "to look after her. To see that she doesn't annoy us, or our guests."

"I'm only human, Miss," Emma told her. "I can't be everywhere at once, and I don't have eyes in the back of my head. If you think you can find someone to do the job better, you go ahead. I can always get a job, and probably things easier to do than be cooped up round the clock with a . . ." She stopped, ap-

palled at what she had been about to say. Silvy finished it for her.

"A crazy woman. That's what they say I am, crazy." She addressed her next remark to me. "Well, I'll admit there's insanity in this family, but I haven't got all of it, I'll tell you that. Sanctimonious . . ."

Whatever she was about to call them, Emma put a stop to it.

"Now, now, Miss Silvy, you don't want to talk like that. Especially in front of a young lady guest."

"She's David's new girl," Silvy informed her.

"She," Iona said between her teeth, "is David's *temporary secretary.*"

"Come along, Miss Silvy, we'll go back upstairs," Emma said, putting a hand on Silvy's arm.

"I haven't had my dessert yet. What's for dessert Olivia?"

Mrs. Montrain was the one who looked anemic now, I thought, and no wonder. Her voice had a peculiarly colorless quality. "There is custard, Silvy."

"Custard." Silvy made a face. "You know I don't like custard, Olivia. Isn't there any ice cream?"

"Yes. Certainly. Emma may get you a dish of ice cream."

"Chocolate? With marshmallow on it?"

"However you like it. Now go with Emma."

"All right." Silvy chortled, patting my arm as she passed my chair. "Don't let them get you down, Sandi. Bunch of . . ."

"Miss Silvy!" Emma said sharply. "Mind your manners!"

The silence lengthened interminably when Emma

and Silvy had gone. The children were devoting themselves to the remainder of the meal; the others had lost their appetites.

"I must apologize, Miss Dalling," Olivia said finally.

"No apology is called for, Mrs. Montrain," I assured her.

When the telephone rang there was a concerted movement toward it, with Olivia reaching it first. I'm sure the others were as happy as I was to break away from the table. Olivia spoke briefly, then relayed the information to the rest of us. "That was David. He has a patient in congestive heart failure. He doesn't expect to be home tonight."

"Can I have his chicken, then?" Willie demanded.

I felt absurdly bereft, knowing that he would not return tonight. Somehow, Silvy must have entered my room during the afternoon and done the damage to my clothes for reasons known only to herself. The family couldn't help it, that a member of their group had deteriorated mentally to this extent. I felt sorry for them, and sorry for Silvy, too.

It was only eight o'clock and I had no desire to go to bed; neither could I face the prospect of an evening in the company of Olivia and Iona. I compromised by returning to the study and my typing.

Another two hours at the typewriter found me tired but not yet sleepy; I gave up and put things away for the night.

There were several lamps burning on the lower floor, but I saw no one, although it was only a little after ten o'clock. I would have liked talking to Toni,

but I had no idea where her room was. When I went quietly back to check the kitchen, I found it dark and deserted.

There was nothing else to do but go upstairs to my room. I wondered about Silvy, and where she slept; whether Emma were actually some sort of bodyguard in reverse. What had Iona said? "You're paid to look after her. To see that she doesn't annoy us, or our guests."

Why did David stay on here? I speculated. His wife had been dead for a year. He seemed to maintain congenial relationships with these people, but where he was warm and compassionate I saw no indication of these qualities in the Montrains.

He had small children, of course, who needed a home. Was that why he stayed? To give them a home? Yet this lack of warmth and compassion, which would normally be extended to orphaned children by their mother's family, seemed equally lacking in regard to Vanessa and Willie.

You haven't been here long enough to be making judgments, I told myself, and went into the room that had been assigned to me.

The dresses which had been destroyed were gone.

I looked quickly around the room, but they hadn't been simply moved from the spot where I had dropped them. They had been removed from the room.

Toni? Or Emma, to whom Silvy might have confessed? But Silvy had said she had been locked up, until just before dinner time when she was able to turn the tables on her keeper and escape.

I closed the door and looked instinctively for a key. There was none. I stood irresolutely, feeling no inclin-

ation to go to bed in this room without being able to lock myself in.

The room was normal and pleasant. I checked the closet and found no more damage there. I walked about uneasily, not in the least sleepy, wishing that David were in the house.

There seemed nothing to do but prepare for bed; I hadn't even been farsighted enough to bring up something to read from the study. I bathed in the lavender bathroom, trying to convince myself that there was nothing to worry about. The animosity I had sensed in the Montrains was probably imaginary; these people were simply more interested in themselves than in a temporary employee, and felt no obligation to put themselves out to be friendly. As for Silvy, it was undoubtedly she who had done the mischief, and Emma would see to it that she had no opportunity to do any more.

I dried and dared to use the bath powder in the fancy container . . . mmm, expensive and delightful! Gayle's?

That set me to thinking about Gayle Montrain Campton. Try as I might, I couldn't recall any details in the newspaper account of her death, except that it had been in a high-speed automobile accident. An accident . . . yet Vanessa had stated that her mother had killed herself. Had that been the official verdict? Suicide?

On impulse, I sat down at the lovely little desk and found the materials to pen a letter to a friend of mine, Carol Thomas. Carol was another "temporary," and we sometimes got together for lunches or concerts. She was, I knew, working now at a routine job for a

firm in Santa Monica, and she would be there for another couple of weeks.

Would you skip over to the library, if you have an evening free, and do something for me? I wrote. *Look up the death of Gayle Montrain Campton, a movie starlet who died on June twelfth of last summer, and write me any of the details. Don't die of curiosity, but I'm working for the man who was her husband, and meeting her family has made me curious. Needless to say, I'd just as soon you didn't mention this to anyone.* I signed the note and slipped it into one of the heavy cream colored envelopes provided for guests, leaving it on the desk for mailing tomorrow.

I was still wide awake, Would anyone object, I wondered, if I went downstairs and tapped that coffee pot that always seemed to be plugged in? I decided to chance it, and leaving all the lights on in my room, I buttoned a light weight duster over my shorty gown and descended the stairs.

There were lights in several rooms, but I didn't see anyone. Somewhere music was playing . . . I recognized part of the score from *Cavaleria Rusticana.*

There were many rooms in this house . . . I wished I knew which of them belonged to Toni. She might be asleep by now, but my guess was that she was not the early to bed type.

There was a nightlight in the kitchen, which illuminated the top of an electric range and cast deep shadows throughout the rest of the room. The pot was plugged in there, a tiny red light promising coffee hot and drinkable. I found a cup and poured some, not bothering to turn on any other lights. I felt safer in the dark.

Now that, I thought, was a silly word. Safe? Why should I feel anything but safe? Silvy had said there was insanity in the family, and she hadn't got all of it, but she was an old woman, senile enough to need a keeper. She couldn't be dangerous or they wouldn't have her here. Would they?

In the night stillness I heard the sound of a car approaching on the shell of the drive. Was the old man who had opened the gate for us earlier expected to be up and about at all hours? Or did they all have their own keys to that fancy gate?

The sound of the motor died away in the distance. Where was the garage? At the time this place was built, they didn't attach garages to houses but hid them off behind the shrubbery.

I sipped at the coffee, wandering over to the row of windows that overlooked the back yard. The pool at night was spectacular; underwater lights gave it an eerie blue-green glow. There were spotlights overhead, too, but those were dark; evidently the pool was kept illuminated whether it was in use or not. A wise precaution, from a safety standpoint.

My attention was caught by movement beyond the near end of the pool. A figure in a light colored garment crossed the tile; I heard the clicking of heels and recognized Toni as she approached the back door, letting herself in quietly.

I was about to speak when she halted, startled, her hand still on the doorknob.

"Who's that?"

"It's me, Sandi. I didn't want to turn on the lights, I'd have felt exposed, with all the glass in this house. I'm having coffee. Shall I pour you some, too?"

She exhaled in relief. "I thought the old bat was loose again. Yes, I'd love a cup, but I'll get it. Sit down."

The old bat . . . "You mean Silvy?" I asked.

Toni kicked off her shoes and wriggled her toes. "Yes. They say she's harmless, but she gives me the willies, you know? Lord, how do you like those wigs, with that face? She looks at herself in the mirror and smiles. Her eyesight must be poor if it doesn't turn her stomach."

She brought her cup to the table and collapsed in a chair. "I guess I haven't any sense, to go out dancing after I've already been on my feet all day. Every so often I swear I'll quit and get a decent job, but this one does have side benefits. And I feel so sorry for Dr. Campton. He deserves better than he gets, here."

"Doesn't he get along with the Montrains?" I asked.

"Oh, they don't fight, or anything like that. But if you ask me, they're both after him. The twins. It's been a year since Gayle died, and I've watched them, getting ready to spring like a pair of giant cats."

I felt a twinge I had no right to indulge, considering that I had only met David this morning and had no claim upon him whatever.

"They can't both have him," I said mildly. "I've only met Iona. Is her sister like her?"

"Physically, yes, they look alike. But their personalities are different. You know how twins sometimes seem to be one person, one personality? Not these two. Iona's forceful, moves right out in the open after what she wants. Iola takes a more circuitous route, but she's just as determined. And if they both want the same

thing they'll fight each other tooth and nail. There's a nasty little story about them as infants, when at the age of three Iona gained possession of some disputed toy and pounded her sister over the head with it until she was a bloody pulp."

"Good grief! They don't still go at it, physically?"

"Well, I've never seen them hit each other," Toni admitted, sipping from her thick mug. "But they sometimes look at one another as if they'd like to."

"Would either one of them," I asked, taking the plunge, "have been likely to go into my room and slash two of my dresses to ribbons?"

Her cup clattered against the plastic topped table. "Are you saying someone did that?"

"Yes. During the afternoon sometime. And now the dresses are gone. Someone took them away."

Toni whistled. "Well, I wouldn't put it past either of them to do it if she wanted to. But why would anyone want to?"

"I think Iona suspects I might be interested in Dr. Campton."

She laughed. "Well, that would get her goat, all right. Are you? Interested in Dr. Campton?"

I was glad it was dark. "I only met him this morning."

"That's no answer. It doesn't take long to decide if you're interested. He's a great guy, Dr. Campton is. Nothing wrong with being interested in him. I would be, myself, if I thought I had a chance. He's good looking, pleasant, intelligent, inherited money and is making plenty more on his own. What more could you ask of a man?"

I didn't really want to discuss David's qualifica-

tions as husband material. "Seriously, Toni, I'm concerned about what happened to my clothes. At first I thought Silvy must have done it, but she said Emma had her locked up all afternoon."

"Well, she's nutty as a fruit cake, so she might easily have done it," Toni admitted. "And she lies like crazy, too, so you'd have to check with Emma to be sure."

"How crazy is she?" I asked bluntly. "Is it because of Silvy that those gates are kept locked?"

"The story they put out," Toni informed me, "is that the gates are locked to keep out sightseers and autograph hunters, and to protect the property. To be truthful, I don't think there are many people left who have any interest in the Montrains, not since Gayle died. She was going to be a star. She had all the Montrain looks but something else, besides . . . she had the warmth all the rest of them lack. Mrs. Montrain used to have it to some extent, but since Gayle's death she's sort of dried up, emotionally. Silvy isn't usually allowed to run around loose, but I don't suppose they'd want her to get off the grounds if she did. She has her own suite of rooms and Emma usually keeps her under control."

"I'd feel better," I said with some feeling, "if I had a key to lock my door. Do you think I need to?"

"I've lived in this house for the last three years, and nobody's ever damaged anything of mine. I never locked the door. But they all know I don't have a chance with Dr. David, if that's why you're resented. Are you going to tell the doctor about it?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided yet. I'd like to

have someone pay for them, but I don't have the evidence to prove what happened to them now. And it seems such a terrible thing to tell anyone."

"Yes," she agreed. "Look, I'd like to sit and talk to you some more, Sandi, but I've got to be up at the crack of dawn. Mrs. Montrain does all the cooking herself, but she wants me to set the table and do all the clean up work. Do you mind if we continue this later?"

"Sure thing." We moved together to the sink to rinse out our cups and slip them into the dishwasher. "You're the only servant in the house, then? Except for Emma?"

"That's me. Old Eli takes care of the grounds and the gates, Emma keeps Silvy out of everybody's hair, and I'm the entire domestic staff. They have a cleaning woman who comes in periodically, and they get extra help when they have parties. They don't have so many of those since Gayle died, though. You should have been here then! Movie stars, producers, all the Hollywood bigwigs . . . it was really something!"

"You were here when Gayle died?" We began to walk toward the door that opened into the wide corridor bisecting the ground floor. "Vanessa said she killed herself . . . but the papers didn't say so, did they?"

I didn't get an answer to that, for as we entered the hallway we saw Mrs. Montrain coming toward us. She was wearing a nightgown and a negligee, but she gave the impression of being formally gowned for a ball, every regal hair in place, the diamonds on her fingers as they had been at dinner.

She regarded us with disapproval. I wondered uncomfortably if she'd been close enough to have overheard my last question.

"It's rather late, Toni, to be disturbing the household."

We hadn't made enough noise between the two of us to disturb the lightest of sleepers. Toni made apologetic sounds, but I remained stubbornly silent.

"You're going to bed now?" There was the slightest inflection making it a question, but I felt that it was intended to be an order.

"Yes. Goodnight, Mrs. Montrain," Toni said, unabashed by the woman's tone.

"Goodnight," I murmured at the same time, unwilling to put myself out to be pleasant to someone who was clearly not prepared to return the courtesy.

As we went up the stairs I had an unobstructed view of the lower passageway. Olivia Montrain stood watching us, her face inscrutable.

I did not speak until we had gained the second floor. I would go straight ahead to reach my room; Toni turned to the left into an unlighted corridor carpeted in the same soft green as the rest of the hallways here. We paused to say goodnight, and I couldn't help asking, "Do you like them? The Montrains?"

"I manage to tolerate them," Toni said, grinning. "Which is kind of funny, you see, because they think that's what they're doing to me. Sometimes I wouldn't stay on if it weren't for him . . . Dr. Campton."

"Yes. He's a rather special sort of person, isn't he?"

"Very special. We'll get together some time tomorrow and talk again, shall we?"

"I'd like that. There are some things I'd like very much to know."

She waved a friendly hand and went on toward her own quarters; I wondered if they were as sumptuous as my own, and if they were part of what persuaded her to stay on here. I didn't think I would work for either Mrs. Montrain or Iona for any longer than it took to get a bus back to town.

Would it have made any difference if Toni and I had continued our talk that night, if I had asked my questions and got some answers? Or had we, even then, overstepped the boundaries that made us . . . or me . . . a menace to the Montrains?

A door closed quietly behind me as I moved toward my own room. I hesitated, looking back, unable to determine which door it had been, or which side of the corridor. Had someone listened to our final words? How angry would they be to know that Toni "tolerated" them? Angry enough to fire her?

It never occurred to me that there might be something worse in store for Toni than losing her job, and that I might unwittingly have contributed to it.

It was I who found her, poor Toni, who might have been my friend. I'll never forget how she looked, crumpled at the foot of the stairs, with that terrible wound turning the dark hair into an oozing crimson mass.

6

Surprisingly, for I was nervous about the unlocked door and upset by the thought of Silvy, or anyone else, running around with whatever weapon had been used to slash my dresses, I slept soundly. I had forgotten to draw the draperies across the expanse of plate glass on the eastern side of the house, however, and the morning sun woke me with its warmth.

The air-conditioning was silent, as yet unactivated, and it was impossible to lie still with the sunlight touching me, bringing a stickiness to my skin and thin gown. I looked at my watch and saw that it was early, only a little after seven. I could have slept at least another half hour.

Reluctantly I got out of bed to draw the draperies, then paused at the window. The swimming pool glittered invitingly below me. An early morning dip . . . that would be the way to start the day!

I stepped out of my nightclothes and into my bathing suit, taking a towel from the bathroom.

The house was silent, sleeping. The towel over my shoulder, I made my way to the front staircase. I had taken three or four steps before I saw her.

She wore her uniform, the crisp black dress with the frilly apron and cap, just like those old movies. I was poised, paralyzed, for a moment on the edge of a step so that I nearly fell myself; then I raced toward her.

I wasn't immediately sure whether she was dead or only unconscious; I couldn't detect any sign of breathing, for she had fallen forward, curled into a semi-fetal position. She hadn't so much as put out her hands to cushion her fall; they were trapped beneath her body.

"Toni! Oh, lord, Toni!" I knelt beside her, appalled at a close range view of the right side of her head. She had taken a terrific blow slightly above and behind her ear; it had bled profusely but was slowing, now; this hadn't happened within the past few minutes, which made it even more alarming.

I was afraid to move her, but it was vital to determine whether or not she was breathing. Heart hammering, I reached for the tiny wrist nearly hidden beneath her. I'd never seriously tried to take anyone's pulse, and I was stunned to feel a strong, throbbing beat; a moment later I realized that it was my own, I had my thumb on her wrist.

I changed position, trying to remember how the doctor had done it last time I'd had a checkup. Fingertips, not thumb. There, that was better . . . I was getting a pulse, wasn't I?

"Toni?" I asked tentatively, but she didn't stir.

"Miss Dalling?" For a few seconds the voice didn't register on my consciousness. Then I raised my head, my eyes traveling the path of the stairway, over one of Toni's high heeled pumps, to Olivia Montrain. "What's happened? Is something wrong?"

"It's Toni . . . she's been knocked out . . ."

She came rapidly down the stairs, then. Dressed, complete with pearls, in another of the pale blue frocks she often wore to compliment her hair. She stared at Toni, her mouth tightening with some emotion I couldn't read.

"How did it happen? Did she trip over something?"

"I didn't see it happen, I only found her. The . . . the bleeding is slowing, but she bled a lot . . . it must have happened some time ago."

She consulted the gem incrusted watch. "She would ordinarily have come down about half an hour ago. I don't suppose David has come in yet, has he?"

"I just came down . . . I haven't seen anyone."

She looked at Toni uncertainly, which I suspected was a state foreign to her.

"I suppose we ought to get her up to her room . . . does she seem to be badly hurt?"

"Move her?" I made no attempt to cover my alarm. "Oh, I don't think we ought to do that, Mrs. Montrain! She's unconscious, she may have been this way for half an hour or more! We'd better get another doctor, don't you think, if Dr. Campton isn't here?"

"What's going on?" Iona appeared at the head of the stairs, knotting a sash around her slim waist, careless of the way the dressing gown gaped at the neck.

"Toni's had a bad fall; check and see if David's

in his room, will you?" her mother requested without looking at her. "I think we'd better get her into a more comfortable position . . ."

How could this idiotic woman have lived in the same house with a doctor for a matter of years without having learned any better than that? I spoke more firmly.

"That might be very dangerous, Mrs. Montrain. She has a nasty head wound and there may be broken bones. We might cause more serious injuries if we try to move her."

"Well, we can't leave her lying there indefinitely." Her voice was dry, as if *I* were the idiot. "Iona, will you please see about David?"

"What about David?"

We had been engrossed in ourselves and Toni; neither of us heard the front door open, but I gave way to him gratefully, wondering if I'd have been able to stop Olivia from moving Toni if he hadn't come.

He came toward us, striding quickly although his face showed the strain of a long, tense night. His fingers, big but incredibly delicate, touched Toni's head, rolled back an eyelid, sought the pulse as I had done.

"I told Miss Dalling we ought to get her up off the floor," Olivia began, but David interrupted as if unaware that she was speaking.

"Call an ambulance, Olivia."

"There's no need for that, surely; she's only fallen down the stairs. She wouldn't want to go to a hospital . . ."

"Call an ambulance, please."

"David, she has no insurance, you know, and the cost . . ."

"The cost be damned!" he said through his teeth. "Will you call an ambulance, Sandi? The phone's there on the table, the ambulance number is just inside the cover of the phone book."

He was intent on Toni, ignoring the spate of words from his mother-in-law. I did as he asked, thanking God that he'd come when he had; I had a horrible vision of a physical tussle over Toni's limp body, with me trying to keep her quiet and Olivia Montrain trying to drag her up the stairs.

Iona had returned and was descending the stairs. "How badly is she hurt, Dave? Mother, for heaven's sake, shut up a minute!"

"She isn't hurt badly, is she?"

"The side of her skull is like a sponge," David said tightly. "A severe skull fracture. What the hell happened to her?"

"She fell down the stairs, obviously. Miss Dalling came along a bit later and found her."

"What did she hit on, to get an injury like that?" He looked past Iona, at the carpeted stairs. "She couldn't have done that on padded carpeting! Didn't anyone see anything, hear anything?"

No one had. I hung up the phone, thankful that the girl who had taken the call had known where Montrain was, that I hadn't had to give directions.

"The gate," I said. "Is the gate locked?"

"Yes, of course. Olivia, will you call Eli and tell him to watch for the ambulance."

Not *unlock the gate*, but *watch for the ambulance*. That might have been significant if I'd thought about it, but I was too worried about Toni.

"She's seriously hurt, isn't she?" I asked quietly.

"If she's been unconscious for any period of time, there's certainly reason for concern. You were right not to let anyone move her, Sandi; it might have done irreparable damage. Olivia, we're going to need breakfast as usual; after you've talked to Eli would you see to that? I've had a hell of a night . . . my patient died, and when we told his wife she collapsed . . . I feel as if I hadn't eaten in days. I'll stay here with Toni . . . Iona, will you show the ambulance attendants in when they come? And I think it might be wise if Sandi intercepted the kids and took them down the other stairs rather than this way. Take them out for an early swim, maybe."

His eyes swept over me, and I remembered how scantily clad I was.

"Where do I find them?" I asked, and he told me, smiling slightly, tiredly. "Thanks, Sandi. If you can keep them busy until we've taken care of Toni it will help. I'll call the hospital and tell them to expect her, and then get hold of George Bakker. She's more in need of a neurosurgeon than an internist at this point, I suspect, and possibly we'll have to get an orthopedist in, too. She's fractured both bones in her right wrist; they're slightly displaced. God only knows what else is broken."

The others had left us, unwillingly, I thought; I looked down at the forlorn little figure with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. "It seems such a nasty wound . . . could she have struck it on the railing?"

We both looked at the railing . . . smooth, straight, no projections of any sort. I couldn't see how she could have struck her head against the top of it,

no matter how she'd fallen, and the carved posts which supported the railing seemed to offer no dangerous edges.

"It's hard to see how. Look on your way up, see if there's blood anywhere. I would think whatever crushed her skull would have retained at least a trace of blood."

He moved to the telephone, and I heard him giving orders . . . "A skull series, films of all extremities . . ." I moved obediently up the stairs, looking carefully for any clues that might make clearer the situation.

I found blood about half way up, just a smear on the pale green carpeting, on the opposite side of the wide stairs from the railing. Had she rolled down, head over heels, rolled up into a ball as she had come to rest? What could have sent her down in the first place? There was nothing to trip over, no loose carpeting, no obstruction of any sort. She had been wearing high heeled shoes, of course; was it possible that she'd simply turned an ankle at the head of the stairway?

There was no sign of blood anywhere on the banister rail or posts. So what, then, would account for that crushing blow on the head?

No answer occurred to me, and I hurried on through the house, following the directions David had given me for finding the children's rooms.

I expected they might still be asleep, and it was for this reason that after I had rapped lightly and called out, "Vanessa?" I opened the door and peered around its edge.

She was awake, propped on a couple of pillows. I had the impression she was reading from a red cov-

ered book, but as she quickly thrust whatever she held under the covers between her knees I couldn't be sure of that.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to barge in on you," I said, trying to smile naturally. "Your father suggested you and Willie might like to go swimming with me before breakfast."

"All right. Have you called Willie?"

"Not yet. His room is the next one down the hall, isn't it?"

"The second door beyond mine," she corrected. "The playroom's in between. You can go through that door there and call him while I put on my suit."

I followed her directions, pausing in the playroom to stare open-mouthed at what rich people's kids have to play with. There was a plush giraffe whose head missed the ceiling by only inches, an incredible array of dolls on display, many of them life-sized, a miniature Rolls Royce that looked elegant enough to be the real thing.

Remembering, somewhat tardily, that I was supposed to be whisking these kids down the back stairs to prevent their coming upon poor Toni's crumpled form, I tapped on Willie's door.

He was quite amenable to the suggestion of a swim and promised to join us in the hall "in a second."

The back stairway was pointed out to me by the kids, and we let ourselves out into the morning heat, already threatening discomfort in spite of the early hour.

The water was refreshing, perfect. If it hadn't been for the consciousness of Toni out there waiting for the ambulance I should have enjoyed it thoroughly. I

commented on the lights I had observed the night before, noting that they had now been turned off.

"They're automatic," Vanessa informed me. "Daddy had them installed because one night someone fell into the pool, and he said they could have drowned. So they come on when it gets dark, and turn off when it gets light. He said if they were automatic we wouldn't have to worry about anybody remembering to turn them on. Listen, Sandi, you look peculiar. If you aren't anemic there must be something else wrong. How long's it been since you've had a check up?"

"I think it's just the heat," I told her. "I'm used to total air-conditioning, I guess."

The sound of a siren was heard, dying down, I thought, when the ambulance reached the gate. The kids both held onto the edge of the pool, ears cocked, listening.

"What's that?" Willie demanded.

"Probably somebody's got the TV on," Vanessa decided. "It sounded like it was right here, didn't it?"

"I didn't notice a television anywhere," I said, wanting to get their minds off the siren. "Do you have a special room for it?"

"Sure. I'll show you," Vanessa offered. "There's one in the playroom, too, and Iona and Iola each have one, and so does Aunt Silvy."

Silvy. "Your Aunt Silvy doesn't usually come downstairs much, does she?"

"I like Aunt Silvy," Willie said, giggling. "She's funny."

"She's batty," Vanessa stated. "But I like her, too. Only Grandma and the twins don't seem to like her; I guess she embarrasses them by the things she says. I

don't see anything wrong with saying what you think, do you?"

"That depends on why you say it, and when. If you're deliberately planning to upset someone, it isn't very nice."

"Aunt Silvy," Willie said, laughing with the recollection, "came downstairs to Aunt Iona's birthday party. Everybody thought she was terrific, except Aunt Iona. Boy, wasn't she mad, Vanessa? She had on a pink wig and a silver suit . . ."

"A silver lame pantsuit," Vanessa elaborated.

". . . and she danced with a movie star. Then Grandma and Emma took her away to get some champagne, they said, but she told me they didn't give her any."

Vanessa had been smiling, too, but now she said soberly, "I don't think that was very nice of them. To promise it to her, and then not give her any. They're always doing that to poor Aunt Silvy."

"Perhaps she forgets what really happens," I suggested, although I wasn't at all sure I believed that, myself.

"Oh, maybe sometimes . . . she's old, she does forget. But not everything." Vanessa had a habit of making positive statements, as if they couldn't possibly be challenged. "Silvy's not stupid."

Did I hear the ambulance leaving? I wasn't sure. Was it time to get the kids out and dressed? Before I decided, Olivia came out to inform us that we could eat in fifteen minutes.

As we climbed out of the pool Vanessa informed me that maybe I was right, the heat had been too much for me, for since I'd cooled off I was looking better.

I couldn't have said, immediately, why I was sure that someone had been in my bathroom. I paused, trying to remember closing the door into the bedroom. I thought I had left it open, but I couldn't be sure.

You're getting a complex, Sandi, old girl, I told myself, and stripped off the wet suit. It was when I dropped it over the towel bar that I noticed the sink.

My breath caught in my chest. A little water stood in the basin, not having completely drained out. Not clear water, but with a pinkish cast to it.

Pinkish . . . I stared at it, not sure why I was again frightened. I remembered then, the last time I had bathed a cut finger, one that had bled so badly I'd had to have it sutured. There had been just such a pinkish tinge to the last of the water, before I'd rinsed out the sink.

Blood? It was a short jump from such an assumption to the memory of Toni, lying at the foot of the front stairs. But Toni hadn't been in my bathroom. David had touched her, but if he'd gotten blood on his hands he wouldn't have come *here* to wash it off.

Even as I looked, the last of the water trickled out; could I have imagined it? Someone would have had to use this basin only moments before I entered to have left visible traces.

No one had come out through my bedroom. But they could have passed through Gayle's room.

Without thinking, I twisted the knob and stared into the white and charcoal and coral bedroom.

It seemed undisturbed. The door into the hallway was closed, as was to be expected.

I took a step into the room, the better to look around, although what good could that do me? Even if

someone had passed through a few minutes earlier there was no reason to think the intruder would have left traces of his passing.

If I hadn't been barefooted, I would never have noticed it. My feet had dried before I ever reached the second floor of the house, but there on the edge of the coral carpeting I encountered water.

Not much. Only enough to be felt with bare feet, for the synthetic carpeting did not absorb the moisture but held it on the surface. I stooped and ran a hand over it, and at close range I could see the drops.

Someone had dripped water from this bathroom across the carpeting in Gayle's room. Not going in the direction of the other doorway, as might have been anticipated, but the other way . . . toward the bed and the nightstand.

I forgot that I had taken off my bathing suit and was not yet dressed. I moved forward on hands and knees, following that faint trail of moisture with an exploring hand.

The water ended but I continued in the direction it had indicated . . . the commode beside the bed, a stand with double doors in the front of it.

And there it was. I stared, goose flesh rising over my body. I didn't have to touch it, for the little remaining water had made a damp spot on the bottom of the storage area, enough to prove that this object had been washed off and then hidden here while still wet. By someone moving with frantic haste . . . unable, perhaps, to eliminate the telltale stains until only moments before I had returned to my room.

I had no doubts that what I looked at, this sturdy

hammer which would have been so innocent looking once returned to the workbench where it belonged, had been used to strike down poor Toni.

I stared at it for the space of several minutes, then carefully closed the doors. What ought I to do about this? What if Toni died? The hammer would be a murder weapon.

Chilled, shaken, I got to my feet and made my way blindly back to my room. If the hammer proved to be a murder weapon, a second assumption might also be made.

Someone in this house was a murderer.

7

I don't know how I got dressed or made my way through breakfast. David was there, and he certainly hadn't been in the house when the attack was made on Toni. He was the one I should tell. But the others were present, too, and my throat ached so that I found it impossible to speak.

No one seemed to notice anything odd about me. Willie asked about Toni's whereabouts, and was told that she had hurt herself in a fall and had to be taken to the hospital.

Iona appeared dressed for work, only a few minutes after I had come down, in a cool looking sleeveless dress. This morning her sister was there, too . . . her twin, Iola. We were introduced, but she had no more interest in me than her sister had, and there was no necessity for me to attempt to make conversation.

I watched her, though, as I observed them all. One

of them struck Toni with that hammer, I thought. One of these people calmly eating scrambled eggs and sausages had deliberately brought that hammer down, full force, against her head, shattering her skull.

Olivia Montrain, regal, poised, apparently unconcerned about anything except serving the meal, had taken over Toni's usual chores. I couldn't imagine her attacking anyone with a hammer. She was too fastidious to risk getting blood on that immaculate pale blue dress.

David ate slowly, tiredly. He was a doctor, dedicated to preserving life; he would never endanger it. That's what people thought of doctors; was it always true? Or did they sometimes, in the manner of other human beings, plot and plan for death? No doubt they did, upon sufficient provocation. There would be more subtle means available to anyone with his training and knowledge, though, a method less likely to be recognized as murder. And he had been gone all night, he had only entered the house after I'd found Toni.

Iona? Slim, self-possessed, attractive. She and her twin discussed their social lives in a desultory manner. Child actress, member of a prominent and wealthy family, presumably secure in a well-paying job, why would she want to harm an insignificant little maid?

Iola looked enough like her to be recognized as a twin, but they were not identical. Even without the difference in hair styling . . . Iola wore hers long and loose, while her sister's was clipped short . . . their features were detectably different. Iola's face was softer, more rounded, as was her figure. But I suspected, listening to their conversation, that she was as self-centered as Iona.

There I was, making judgments on these people in a way not at all habitual with me. Live and let live . . . I'd always believed in that. I still did. Only one of these people had tried to kill Toni.

I might have included the children, however unlikely, on my list of suspects for the damage that had been done to my clothes. But no child had wielded that hammer.

There were two members of the household I had temporarily forgotten. I roused from the near-stupor to which fear had driven me when one of them appeared in the doorway as we were finishing up.

This morning Silvy wore a beautiful wig of dark, luxuriant hair piled high on her head in an elaborate style caught here and there with sparkling stones. Beneath this mass of hair the raddled old face smiled brightly.

"Oh, David, there you are! I thought you'd forgotten about me, it's time for my medication!"

"No, it isn't, Silvy." David pulled out a chair for her at a vacant place. "You've confused the days. It isn't until tomorrow. Sit down, have a cup of coffee with us."

Silvy took the chair, which happened to be next to me. "Don't mind if I do. I like it hot, and I always get the leftovers. It's never hot when it gets up to my room."

Olivia's mouth tightened, but she didn't refute the charge. Silently, she poured a steaming cup and passed it to her sister.

Silvy reached into the pocket of the flowered smock she wore with a pair of slim trousers and tossed a necklace onto the tablecloth. I was, for a moment,

drawn out of my preoccupation with the attack upon Toni, for it looked to be extremely valuable. It was in a tangle, but I could see one large green stone that was most impressive.

Silvy heard my indrawn breath and turned to me, pleased. "You like jewelry? What a silly question, every woman likes jewelry, doesn't she? That's the Talbot emerald."

Apparently my face didn't register the proper awe.

"You've never heard of the Talbot emerald? Well, I suppose you're too young. It hasn't changed hands since Rudy bought it for my birthday . . . or was it our anniversary? Anyway, it was in 1934. It was in the papers, it was one of the finest emeralds in existance at that time. Still is, for that matter." She pushed at the necklace with scrawny fingers overburdened with rings. "Take that in and have the clasp fixed, will you?" For a moment I didn't realize she was addressing Iona. "It isn't completely broken, but it doesn't hold securely, and I want to wear it to the opening."

There was a moment of silence. Then David asked gently, "What opening is that, Silvy?"

"Why, the premiere . . . I forgot the name of the picture, but Neil sent me an invitation, and of course I mean to go. Olivia, will you see to it that my green satin is cleaned? I think there's a spot on it."

Olivia pushed the necklace along to Iona, her face wooden. "Certainly, Silvy."

Silvy turned her smile on me, and I wondered if it would seem so gruesome if it were not for that improbable head of hair. "You remember Neil Garvin, the producer? He produced any number of Rudy's

films. They were fast friends. He hasn't forgotten me, although everyone else has. There was a time when everyone knew me."

Every face around the table, except Silvy's, was without expression, carefully held that way. The children were squabbling by themselves over something in low voices that hadn't yet drawn the fire of the adults. Was Silvy rational, or wasn't she?

Her withered arms looked frail, but there must be some strength in them if she could comfortably wear all the rings and bracelets that adorned them. She was small, but tall enough to have struck Toni over the head, if she'd caught her unawares . . . How could I be sitting here in this normal looking dining room thinking such things?

Iona picked up the necklace and pushed back her chair. "It'll take a couple of days, probably."

"So long as I have it by Saturday night. Are those raisin buns? I didn't get any raisin buns on my tray."

Olivia pushed the platter toward her, not speaking. Silvy took one, buttered it lavishly, and bit into it with audible satisfaction. She spoke again to me, as if I were her confederate and confidante.

"I don't think much of that stuff Iona makes. It's all fake, you know. But that outfit she works for does know how to repair things properly. It's so difficult to find anyone who does things properly, these days."

The silence was so prolonged, so awkward, that I felt compelled to break it.

"Do I understand that you make jewelry?" I addressed Iona, and then, at the flash of animosity in her eyes, wished I hadn't bothered. Let them stew in their own silences, they were none of my making.

She answered me civilly enough, however. "I design jewelry for Renault Films. Someone else makes it up. It is fake, of course, but it's so expertly done that moviegoers never know the difference."

"I wouldn't feel comfortable," Silvy said virtuously, helping herself to another raisin bun, "wearing junk jewelry."

"It's hardly junk." Iona's voice was dry. "Some of it is quiet valuable, as a matter of fact. All right, I'll get this fixed. Are you riding in with me, Iola?"

Her sister shook her head, the long dark hair moving against the white of her summer dress. "No. I have a date this afternoon. I'll take my own car."

"Where is it you're going?" Silvy asked interestedly.

"To work, the same as usual. I also work at Renault Films, remember?"

"I remember when the Montrains were *personages* at Renault Films," Silvy said. "What is it you do there? I don't seem to remember."

Iola's face was faintly pink. "I'm a receptionist in Paul Renault's office."

"Paul Renault?" Silvy frowned. "I don't seem to remember him, either? I remember Everett and Donald."

"Donald died two years ago." I thought there was intentional cruelty in Iona's voice. "And Everett is dying of lung cancer. Paul is head of the studio now. He's Everett's oldest son."

"Everett dying . . ." Silvy was completely sobered. "Oh, my, and I didn't know. I'd like to send him some flowers. Do you think I could do that, David?"

David's was the only voice to reveal any compassion

when he spoke to Silvy. "Certainly. Would you like me to take care of it for you?"

"Would you? Yellow roses. He always liked yellow roses, I think. Or was that Donald? No, I think it was Everett. Do you think he'll remember my name? Nobody remembers the Montrains any more."

"I'm sure he'll remember you, Silvy."

"Since poor Gayle died . . . do you remember Gayle?"

I nodded. "I saw her in several pictures."

"Such a sweet girl. So lovely, so talented. It was such a tragedy, dying the way she did."

Something crackled around the table. I didn't know what it was but recognized that as a unit the others had come to the end of their patience with Silvy. The twins began to move and Iona dropped the necklace carelessly into the purse she took from a nearby chair.

"I won't be home for dinner, Mother. See you all tomorrow."

"Me, too." That was Iola, flipping her hair as she spun about, seeming somehow younger than her twin. "Goodbye, all."

The disagreement between Vanessa and Willie was brought out at that point into open warfare when she slapped him sharply across the face. The little boy immediately became a tearful tiger, scratching and hitting at her, until David lifted them bodily apart.

"That's enough! What's the matter with you two? Haven't you any manners at all?"

"She hit me!" Willie shouted.

"He called me a filthy name," Vanessa said, coldly controlled.

"You are a . . ." His father's hand, clamped over his open mouth, cut off Willie's bellow.

"Another word, Willie, and I'll paddle you. Go on, behave yourself. I've got to call the hospital and see if there are any reports on Toni yet."

They all moved away from me. I felt like a small island in a sea of horror. What was I going to do about that hammer upstairs? Even now Toni might be dying . . .

I couldn't go into the study and start typing. I hesitated near the open doorway while David spoke on the telephone in the hall. I was unable to interpret his cryptic comments. His face, when he replaced the receiver, was grave and I knew I had delayed long enough. It was time to speak.

"Dr. Campton . . ." My voice was a peculiar squeak, as if it needed lubricating. Why hadn't I thought out in advance how I would say it? How I would accuse someone in his household of trying to kill Toni?

"I think I ought to speak to you," I managed. "In private, please," for I had glimpsed Olivia at the far end of the corridor.

He seemed not to have registered the sense of what I said. "She's worse than I thought. I talked to Bakker for a minute. He's the neurosurgeon. They're taking her to surgery in about an hour for the fractured skull. They didn't find any other fractures, except for the arm, but it doesn't look good. There may be brain damage."

I was wordless. Toni, pretty, young, with everything to look forward to. *Brain damage.*

"I guess you can find plenty to do here to-

day, whether I'm here or not. I'd love to sack out for a few hours, but I really feel I ought to go in and see what I can do about Toni . . ."

"Before you go . . ." My lips were stiff; it seemed that speaking would cause them to crack. "I have something to tell you."

"It'll wait until I get back, won't it? I have to pick up Toni's parents and take them to the hospital, and I'd like to be there during the surgery, I feel responsible for the girl. Go ahead, just do what you can do without difficulty; if there are any questionable things, hold them up until this afternoon. OK?"

What could I say? My tongue wasn't agile enough to come up with the proper words so quickly, and he didn't give me much time, for with a small smile he turned on his heel and was gone.

Coward, I chided myself. *You don't want to see his face when you give him this terrible piece of information. But you must tell him. He has a right to know . . . and he'll call the police.* Surely he would immediately call in the authorities.

Well, I'd blown my "confession," but there was one thing I could do. I could get that hammer and put it in a safer place, a place unknown to the attacker, who might be back after it when it could be safely spirited out of the deserted bedroom and disposed of. I'd heard that it was extremely difficult to remove all traces of blood from anything by simply washing it; there was a chance that a police lab could prove it was a blunt instrument which had fractured Toni's skull.

I moved quickly upstairs and through the bedroom I had originally looked upon as pleasant and homey. I was more and more sure that the attacker had had a

problem in getting rid of the hammer, a problem in finding a place to clean it and stash it without risking getting caught with it. He would be back (no, *she* would, for I had ruled out any complicity on David's part, had I not?) for the hammer; the commode in Gayle's room was not intended to be a permanent hiding place.

Where could I put it? I glanced around the room, wondering if there were a safe place here. It should be wrapped in something, just in case there might remain the trace of a fingerprint, unlikely though that was. Everybody knew about fingerprints these days, and if there'd been time to wash it, there had been time to wipe away the fingerprints.

I could wrap it in one of the small sized towels from the bathroom. I took one of them, white with a pattern of lavender forget-me-nots, and without hesitating opened the door to Gayle's room.

Not letting myself think about handling the tool that had been used for such a gruesome task, I opened the door to the commode, eager to get it over with, to have it safe to hand over to my employer and, eventually, the police.

There was an area of moisture on the paper lining the commode. Nothing else. The hammer was gone.

8

The day passed with maddening slowness. I typed chart after chart, but no longer was I engrossed in the human stories that unwound off the tapes. Instead, I pictured that operating room where someone was picking slivers of bone out of Toni's brain . . . was that what they were doing? . . . and imagined her mother and father sitting anxiously in the waiting room, praying.

Somewhere, someone else was thinking of Toni, too. Someone who had wanted her dead, and no doubt still did. Why?

I thought back over the conversation we had had, so unrevealing from my viewpoint. Had something she told me . . . or something I'd indicated I wanted to know . . . been overheard by a member of this household, who had proceeded to prevent any further revelations?

There had been a nasty story about Iona, she'd said,

attacking her sister and pounding her until she was bloody. Was Iona still going around pounding people?

How absurd. That had been at the age of three, in a temper tantrum. All children struck out in anger at siblings, didn't they? Witness Vanessa and Willie this morning. A childhood episode that meant nothing, nothing at all.

Yet someone had done this thing. Silvy? "She's nutty as a fruitcake," Toni had said. Even the children thought her "batty." There were various forms of battiness, however, not all of them necessarily violent.

Thinking about it nearly drove me batty, too. Had I actually heard a door close when we came upstairs? Had someone listened to our conversation? By indicating to Toni that I was curious about the Montrains, that I expected to draw upon her more intimate knowledge of them, had I unwittingly caused what happened to her?

Vanessa came to call me to lunch. She stood on one foot, scratching an insect bite on her calf with the toes of the other foot.

"Gram's not feeling well, she's gone up to lie down. She said she hoped it was all right with you if we just fixed some sandwiches and ate in the kitchen, you and Willie and me."

"Of course." I switched off the typewriter, neck and shoulders aching as if I weren't used to long hours typing. It was the strain of worrying, no doubt; I was so tense that any unexpected noise would have sent me into orbit. "What about the women upstairs? Silvy and Emma?"

"Oh, I expect Emma'll fix something for them.

Gram was mad because Emma let Aunt Silvy come down this morning; they had a row about it." We began to walk down the long corridor toward the kitchen, her bare feet slapping on the polished hardwood. "Emma said Silvy's getting so foxy she can't keep up with her. Gram said if Emma was getting too old to cope, they'd have to let her go. I think she's mostly cross because Toni's gone, and she has to do everything herself. She usually does all the cooking, but she hates to wash up. I kept out of sight . . . next thing she'll be wanting me to help with that."

"There's a dishwasher," I pointed out. "That ought to make it an easier job."

"If I'm going to be a surgeon," Vanessa said, extending her hands to look at them critically, "I have to protect my hands. A surgeon's hands are very important, you know."

"Have you decided to be a surgeon? But they spend a lot of time scrubbing their hands, don't they? Before every operation?"

"All the more reason not to get them rough and red doing anything else that's hard on them," she said. "I got out all the stuff for sandwiches; is it OK if everybody makes their own? I'd make yours, but I might not get what you liked."

"Perfectly all right," I agreed. When I saw her combine tuna fish, peanut butter, mayonnaise, and cheese, I was glad I'd made my own. It was a pleasant meal in the big, sunny kitchen, comfortable with the air-conditioner now running audibly. I was glad not to have to sit at the table with any of the Montrains, speculating about them in such an awful way.

Vanessa kindly escorted me back to the study after

lunch, and we passed a room which I saw for the first time with the door open. There was a large glass-fronted cabinet with row upon row of trophies of some sort, and I paused, interested in anything that would delay my return to typing and my own thoughts.

"What are those?"

"Archery trophies. You want to see them?"

Without waiting for an affirmative reply, she led the way into the room. From the hall I had glimpsed only one wall. Once inside, I saw that the entire room was devoted to gleaming, polished cups and statuettes, and to the archery equipment itself: bows, arrows, quivers, and an assortment of connected objects.

"Who's the expert?" I wandered to the nearest display and saw the inscription *First Prize, Class A, David Campton,* and a date a year earlier. "Your father? Are they all first prizes?"

"No, but a lot of them are. Those are Daddy's, Iona and Iola each have their own cabinet, too. Gram doesn't have any trophies. She never liked shooting in tournaments, but she'd win, if she went. She's pretty good, too."

I had never imagined such fancy bows as these. I knew without asking that they were expensive, certainly not the primitive toys my brothers and I had had as youngsters. I ran a finger over the glossy surface of a magnificent bow which appeared to be made in layers of wood over some other substance I didn't recognize.

"It's laminated fiberglass and African bubinga; that's one of Daddy's target bows. Did you ever shoot a bow?"

"When I was about your age or a little more I used

to compete with my brothers. They always beat me. I never even saw anything like these, though." We wandered around the room, with me occasionally touching something that seemed special. The arrows, Vanessa told me, were colored individually for their owners: David's were orange and black, Iona's were a hot pink, Iola's were bright blue and white. There were other colors, but these three combinations predominated.

"That makes it easier for each person to tell his own. Those are mine, the bright red ones with the white bow. Willie's are green. Willy can't shoot very well, but Daddy says I might enter the local competition next year."

So far all the arrows we had looked at were of a familiar type, regular target arrows with a tapered but not sharp point. But suddenly I saw a set of matched aluminum arrows with orange and black fletching, or feathers, that indicated they belonged to David. However, these were tipped with the wickedest looking blades I had ever seen. Two inches long, triangular in shape, with double edged razor sharp blades an inch across at their base. I had never seen anything that looked more lethal than these.

"They're broadheads, or some people call them razorheads. They're hunting arrows. You know, for killing deer or something like that. No one is allowed to shoot those on the range; when Daddy practices with his hunting bow before deer season he changes the heads to field points. They're too dangerous to practice with."

I had to agree to that. "Where do you practice?"

"We have our own range, out beyond the garage.

You can come along and watch us next time we shoot; we do it fairly often when the weather's nice. Maybe you'd like to try it?"

"Maybe," I said.

A telephone shrilled, and both our heads came up.

Toni, I thought. Toni had died. It was David calling to tell us, and now he'd have to listen to me. But what could I tell him? That I'd seen a hammer that I thought had blood on it, but which was now missing? What would be the good of that?

Vanessa ran down the corridor to answer it. I waited, knowing I ought to get back to my tapes, but unable to move, fearing to hear her report. I knew she was speaking to David.

She hung up and told me. "It was Daddy. Toni's out of surgery, but he's going to stay with her for a while. He said to tell Gram he probably won't get home for dinner again tonight. What happened to Toni? Why did she need surgery from falling down the stairs?"

I spoke with an effort. "She struck her head, somehow. She has a nasty wound just here." I touched my own head and shivered, thinking how someone had lain in wait for her there where the corridors met.

"Poor Toni. I wonder if it will leave scars."

I had no answer for that. I suspected a scar was the least of Toni's worries at the moment. David wouldn't be staying with her unless she were critical, would he?

I tried to become absorbed in the tapes when Vanessa was gone, but my mind kept straying. Should I tell David about the hammer now? Or was it pointless, since it had vanished? I would put myself in the position of making an accusation about this family with no evidence whatever to back it up. Perhaps it would

be wiser to keep still for now, and keep my eyes open.

I stopped working early, at about a quarter to five. I would swim for a time before I got ready for dinner, I decided; perhaps the water would help me relax, for the ache in the back of my neck was now decidedly vicious. Knowing your tension is causing pain, and being able to relax, are worlds apart, but the swimming might accomplish what will power could not.

I had reached the second floor landing when I heard their voices. Silvy's, shrill, outraged; Emma's placating and firm. I hesitated, looking down the right hand hallway in the direction of the sounds. If Emma were having trouble, did I want to attempt to lend a hand or had I better stay out of it?

It was decided for me when they burst out of Silvy's suite into the passageway, Emma trying ineffectually to prevent the other woman's exit from her room. Silvy, a golden blonde wig awry, faced me with anger.

"They've stolen them, the . . ." The words loosed by her tongue stung me to impotence. Not that they were words I'd never heard, but this was the first time a woman had ever used them in my hearing. "They won't get away with it, I'll tell you that! They're all insured, and the insurance company will make sure I get them back if they have to fill the house with detectives!"

"Miss Silvy, you've only misplaced them, no doubt," Emma said, tugging at the older woman's sleeve.

For all her diminutiveness, Silvy was no weakling. She brushed Emma aside and continued toward me, her face mottled with anger.

"What is it?" I asked uncertainly. "Is there something I can do to help?"

"It's my jewels! They're missing, they're all gone!"

"That's not true, Miss Silvy," Emma interjected. "There are a number of things in your box . . ."

"Trash!" Silvy spat. "Chip diamonds, garnets, all the stuff that's practically worthless! Where are the diamonds, the rubies, the sapphires, the emeralds?"

"You gave your niece a necklace this morning."

"I know where that one went," she said impatiently. "What I want to know is where the others are! My jewels are insured for half a million dollars! I haven't got five thousand dollars worth left in there! They've been trying to talk me out of them for months, saying an old woman didn't need them, and when that didn't work they stole them! My own family, thieves!"

I looked past her at Emma, not knowing what to believe. Silvy occasionally made some wild statements, but sometimes what she said made sense, too, so how was I to know?

"Are her things missing? You know what jewelry she has?"

"Yes," Emma conceded unhappily. "I'll admit the more expensive pieces don't seem to be there, but she's probably hidden them somewhere and forgotten where . . ."

"I'm not senile yet!" Silvy snapped. "They were there in the rosewood box this morning when I took out the necklace for Iona to have repaired! Now they're gone! And don't tell me I did something to them in the past couple of hours and don't remember it! Where's Olivia? It was either her or those twins of hers!"

She brushed past me and again Emma tried to stop her, clinging to her arm in desperation. "She'll be firing me, Miss Silvy, if you go bothering her again! She said she would if I couldn't control you! Be a good girl, Miss Silvy, and wait until Dr. Campton comes home. You can tell him about it."

"It wasn't David that took them," Silvy said reasonably, her rage abating somewhat. "So what's the use of telling him? It's Olivia and the twins who are always after me. Iola told me diamonds made me look *old!*" She gave a snort of indignant laughter. "It'll take more than the opinion of a jealous little brat to make me stop wearing them! Neil Garvin has invited me to a premiere, and I shall go as I always have . . . wearing a fortune on my bosom! Whatever they've done with them, they'll have to give them back!"

"Miss Silvy, do you want to get me fired?" Emma pleaded as her charge would have gone on down the hall toward her sister's room. "If I go, there's no telling who they'll get . . ."

Silvy paused. "I'll tell her I don't want you fired."

"That won't be good enough, you know that! She isn't feeling well today, anyway, and you know how her temper is when she has a headache."

Silvy hesitated. "But I can't just let them go . . . all my jewels!"

"No, of course not, but you can wait until Dr. Campton comes home. He's the one to get something done about it, not your sister."

They argued about it for a few more minutes, but eventually Silvy was won over. Emma, triumphant but exhausted, led her back to her room.

My swim was refreshing and did, after a time, seem

to help the ache in my neck; it did nothing, however, to quiet the turmoil in my mind. The smart thing to do, I thought, floating in the unruffled aqua pool, would be to pack up and insist on being taken back into the city. Montrain was a lovely estate, but it seemed an unhealthy place to be. There were other jobs. Mrs. Arlie frowned on leaving a job unfinished, but she would surely understand my reasons if I left this one. A woman who was irrational and violent, a mysterious person who attacked a maid with a hammer, a family who shared a strange antipathy toward me.

On the other side of the coin, it would be the first time I'd left a job without authorization. And if I walked off now it was a cinch I'd never see David Campton again.

I wanted to go on seeing David. I wanted it very much. And after all, I mused, closing my eyes against the afternoon sun, although there were violent emotions in this house they were not directed at me. I could hardly say truthfully to Mrs. Arlie that I feared for my own safety if I remained here.

And so I decided to stay, and although I did not know it, the strands of the net were tightening around us all, but especially around me.

9

They arrived home within minutes of one another . . . Iona, Iola, and David. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and while David had made it perfectly clear that I was not expected to work evenings I was still at the typewriter, simply because I couldn't bear to go upstairs to bed.

Olivia had prepared a simple casserole and salad supper; she ate with me and the children, merely picking at her food. Vanessa informed me later that her grandmother suffered from migraine, and indeed, she did appear ill. Presumably Silvy and Emma ate upstairs in their suite, but I never saw any trays going back and forth, so it was impossible to tell whether or not they ate the same as we did.

The kids retired to watch television immediately upon finishing their meal. I wondered if I ought to offer to assist with the dishwashing detail, knowing that Olivia was not well, but I wasn't brave enough to risk

her rebuff should she decide that I was stepping out of line. There were only four of us and there *was* an electric dishwasher. Nevertheless, I felt guilty, and knew that if my hostess had been a different sort of woman I would have volunteered to help her.

All the time I typed, listening with one ear to the drone of David's voice on the tapes, I was listening with the other for the sound of a car or the front door. When it finally came, I quickly set my work aside and went out into the hall.

David was there, weariness in every line of his body, with the twins on either side of him. Iona was monopolizing him at the moment; I think I was the only one who observed her sister's smoldering eyes. Toni was right; there was no love lost between the twins, at least not in the area of David Campton.

I moved toward them, eyes searching his face for some clue to Toni's condition, but all I could read was exhaustion. He replied to whatever Iona had said, then summoned a smile for me.

"Hello, Sandi. Have any trouble today?"

"Not with the tapes, no. How is Toni?"

He shrugged. "Holding her own, I guess. She's still unconscious. The sooner she comes out of it the better."

"She is . . . going to live, isn't she?"

"I hope so. At this point it's anybody's guess . . . Bakker wouldn't commit himself for her parents' benefit, but he told me it doesn't look good. He's as puzzled as I am about how she could have gotten that injury falling down a flight of carpeted stairs. You didn't see where she'd hit anything, did you?"

"Not on the stairs, no." To tell him about the ham-

mer, or not? I was reluctant to do so, with no physical evidence to back up my statement. Yet I felt compelled to report what I knew to someone. Only not here. Not in this public hallway with Iona and Iola listening in. "I'd like to talk to you, the first chance you get . . ."

"In the morning? I'm beat now, and that's no lie. I think I'll have a sandwich and a drink and go to bed. Thank God I'm reasonably resilient; I'll have to get back to work tomorrow or I'll wind up this 'vacation' still behind on all my charts. What in hell is that?"

He paused and we all looked upward. Silvy's voice rose in a screech, accompanied by Emma's lower tones.

"Is that David? David, you won't believe it, but they've stolen everything, every blessed piece of any value!" Silvy moved regally down the stairs, once more in her platinum blonde wig with the loose, girlish styling. She had prepared for bed, but had waited up to report to David, dressed in a frilly sheer white negligee with blue ribbons, over an equally lavish nightie and dainty slippers on her blue veined feet.

She closed one talon-like hand over David's arm, preventing his retreat. "You must do something about it, or I'll call the police myself, even if they are my relatives!"

It was clear to everyone but Silvy that he was in no condition to take on another problem, but he stood patiently, looking down on her from his superior height.

"Wait a minute, Silvy! What is this? What's missing?"

"My jewelry! All gone, there's nothing left but bits

and pieces! It was there when I got the emerald to give to Iona, but now it's gone!"

If it were true that she owned half a million dollars worth of stones, as seemed likely from what I had seen so far, this might expectably have caused some concern, not to say consternation.

It did nothing of the sort. David's expression didn't change. He looked to Emma for confirmation. The twins were bright eyed, interested, but far from alarmed.

"Well, sir, they *are* missing from the rosewood box," Emma admitted unwillingly.

"She probably hid them somewhere," Iola suggested, "and forgot where. The way you did with your gloves, Aunt Silvy."

"I certainly know better than to treat a fortune in jewels as casually as I would a pair of gloves," Silvy told her, glaring. "I didn't misplace them, I haven't had them out of the box. They've been taken, I tell you, and I know who took them."

She stared into Iola's face as she spoke, but if it made the girl uncomfortable I couldn't tell it.

Iola grinned, her lovely face impish and unperturbed. "Well, don't look at me, sweetie, because *I* haven't got them. And I'll tell you the truth, I'm dead beat, and I want a hot soak in the tub and a full eight hours before I take off again. So goodnight, all. Don't let her drag things out all night, Dave, you know it's a hornet's nest without cause, as it always is." She raised herself to kiss him lightly on the cheek, patting his arm as she did so. "Her precious jewels will show up tomorrow in some unlikely place, and then she'll remember how they came to be there."

She went on past us to the stairs, ignoring Silvy's squeal of protest. David laid a hand over Silvy's on his arm and spoke gently.

"Regardless of what's happened to them, Silvy, there isn't much we can do tonight. Let's all get some rest, shall we, and we'll tackle it in daylight? Iola's right, they'll turn up tomorrow. No one can get into the grounds to steal them, so they have to be in the house."

"There are people living in this house," Silvy told him, "who've tried to get my jewels away from me for years. I wouldn't give them up, so they've simply taken them. But I don't intend to take that lying down, I tell you; I'm going to call the police!"

"All right, if they don't turn up tomorrow, we'll consider the police. But they won't come this time of night, and it's only sensible to make a search for them, first. We'll feel pretty silly if the jewels turn up the first place the officers look. Please, Silvy."

"He's right, Miss Silvy," Emma put in. "Come along, let's get some rest, the poor doctor's out on his feet. We'll find them, surely we will, when it's daylight and we can look."

Silvy's eyes swept their faces, then came to rest on mine. "They're all trying to make out that I'm a half-wit, but I'm not, you know. I hope you believe that."

"Of course I believe it," I said, although at that point I didn't know what I believed about this family . . . maybe they were all crazy.

"Well . . ." She gave in, relinquishing David's arm. "Iona, would you come up and give me back that book you borrowed. You're finished with it, aren't you?"

"Can't that wait until tomorrow, too?" I didn't miss the quick glance Iona lent David; she had something she wanted to say to him, or she intended to finagle a little time alone with him yet this evening.

"But I want to read it now, before I go to sleep. I'll never relax enough to sleep without something to read."

Iona's mouth tightened perceptibly, but when David said, "Go along, Iona, help Emma get her quieted down," she brought forth a smile for him that removed all sullenness from her features, and the three of them moved up the stairs together.

"I don't suppose you're in the mood for a late snack?" David asked when we were left alone. "Or up to making me one? Frankly, I'm not sure I've got enough energy left to butter the bread."

"Of course," I agreed eagerly. "Why don't you sit down and relax, and I'll bring you something?"

"No, no, I'll come along to the kitchen. I don't want to fall into a comfortable chair or I'll never make it to bed. I'm sorry my household is making such a terrible impression. We aren't always so chaotic as we've been since you got here."

I could hardly deny that they were making an unfavorable impression, but I didn't want to talk about it. I ought to tell him about that hammer . . . in fact, I must do so. But tomorrow, I thought, when he was rested and able to cope with what could only be a nasty shock. It would be hitting a man while he was down, to do it now.

I made sandwiches for both of us, and he mixed us each a highball to go with them. We ate at the kitchen table and he told me about the day he'd had . . . ob-

serving during the surgery on Toni, talking to her parents, sitting at her bedside in the recovery room. He'd made rounds for his other patients, too, and several of them were in critical condition in the Coronary Care Unit.

We didn't dawdle over our snack; I knew he was worn out and I stood as soon as we'd finished.

"Why don't you go on up, I'll rinse out our glasses and be right along," I offered.

"Oh, I'm not in that much of a hurry. It helps me to unwind, to come in and have someone to talk to, to get some of it out of my system after a rough day," he said, smiling in a way that I found most endearing. I couldn't, after all, blame the twins too much for being interested in him. Here they were, exposed to him every day; what was more natural than that they should feel, when he'd passed through a year of mourning for Gayle, that it might be time to hint that there were other women in the world?

So we walked upstairs together, talking about something rather inconsequential. His room was in one wing, mine in another; we paused at the head of the stairs to say soft-voiced goodnights.

"You're a nice girl, Sandi Dalling," he said in that deep, quiet voice. "Very restful. The other women in this house are varied and interesting, but they are never restful. Sometimes a man craves peace and quiet." His smile deepened for a moment, and then he was gone.

I had taken two steps along the corridor when I heard it again. The same sound I had heard last night, when Toni and I had climbed the stairs together. The cautious click of a latch as a door was closed.

Again I couldn't identify the room. Whose rooms were they, those nearest the head of the stairs? Not Silvy's, nor those of the children . . . but someone listened.

Nothing had been said that could have been of the slightest interest to anyone, I thought, but I was chilled as I moved on to my own room. I wasn't used to eavesdropping, or attempted murders, or jewel thefts.

On the threshold of the room that had been made mine for my stay here, I stopped. Someone had been in the room, and it certainly hadn't been Toni with any maid's chore like bringing fresh linens or turning down my bed.

Something was ringing an alarm inside my head and my pulses raced. How could I be so sure that someone had been here? I closed the door behind me but went no further into the room. What was the difference? The book I had been reading earlier, one borrowed from the study, lay open on the nightstand. The bed was smooth and unrumpled, as I had left it. The closet door was closed, the bathroom door open. All as it should have been.

Yet I was absolutely certain that someone had been in this room, and recently. Perhaps within the past few minutes.

I moved slowly, checking the bathroom, which gleamed lavender and white and empty. No ominous feeling there. Back to the bedroom . . . and then I knew.

Perfume. Delicate, yet distinctive and definite. Perfume not my own.

No use in speculating on which of them. It could have been anyone, Olivia, Iona, Iola, Silvy, or Emma, although I was inclined to drop Emma from the list. I didn't recognize the perfume, but I knew it was expensive, more expensive than Emma would be likely to use.

I rolled back the closet door, checking my clothes, but there were no more damaged garments. The scent was stronger, here, however, as if the wearer had stepped inside the compartment, trapping it there.

Why? What had anyone wanted in my wardrobe? There weren't so many things hanging there that it was a major task to take them out, one by one, and look them over. Nothing, no damage, no slightest change of any sort.

What, then? My suitcase was there on the shelf; I took it down and opened it, but it was empty. Already the scent was fading, until I began to wonder if I had imagined it.

No, I told myself firmly, coldly. I hadn't imagined it, it was there, stronger in the closet. Nothing appeared to be missing. In that case, had something been added?

The thud of pulsing blood in my ears made me dizzy, and I steadied myself on the edge of the sliding door. It moved a few inches under my hand, and when I looked down I saw the only other contents of the closet.

My shoes. Not too many, half a dozen pairs, including a pair of slippers.

Dropping to my knees, I lifted them, one after an-

other, and there it was, in a pair of summer pumps. I nearly missed it, for the handkerchief was white, too, and tucked well down into the toe.

A handkerchief, wrapped around something hard and lumpy. I think I knew before I unwrapped it.

Another necklace, this one in what I assumed to be diamonds and sapphires, sparkling and beautiful as they caught the light.

My chest hurt when I breathed, and I realized I had been holding my breath. Silvy's, no doubt. Why here? Why hidden in my closet?

There would be a search in the morning, they had said. Had they, as all of them indicated, believed that Silvy had simply misplaced them? Or did one of them know where they were? Had one of them hidden this one here in my shoe, or had Silvy done it herself?

And, regardless of which way it was, for what purpose? If someone had indeed wanted to steal the gems for their monetary value, they wouldn't have been put in my room. Was it the act of an insane person, or a senile one, to deliberately hide a treasured item and then create a tremendous fuss over its loss? Or was there a more sinister explanation?

Had someone, for instance, wanted the jewelry to be found in my room? To implicate me in some way, perhaps to suggest that I had taken it?

The thought made me feel cold. Not that I gave a damn what the Montrains thought about me. But I cared about the opinion of the agency which had sent me. And I cared very much what David Campton thought.

I rewrapped the necklace in the handkerchief . . . a plain white linen square . . . and relieved

my cramped legs by getting to my feet. Was this the only piece, or was there more of it?

In the next hour I made a thorough search of the room and found nothing more. This necklace had been hidden in such a place that it would easily have been discovered during the morning's search, and I hoped that the culprit hadn't been more clever about other valuables. At least I would be spared the mortification of having the missing item show up in my possession.

The question at the moment was, what to do with it? Someone knew it was here, of course, and would realize I had found it and moved it when it wasn't in my shoe the next day. I wasn't concered with that so much as getting it out of my possession immediately.

The sensible thing to do would be to pack up and call for a taxi, first thing in the morning. Anyone with a brain in her head would do just that.

By noon tomorrow I could be reassigned to another job, forgetting all about Montrain and the people who lived there.

Except, I thought wistfully, forgetting David would take a little longer. The man who had smiled at me so warmly, and told me I was a nice girl, and restful—just the sort a man needs when he's tired and finely-drawn by a difficult day.

It would be like casting him to the wolves to leave now. She wolves. The worst possible kind.

No. The decision virtually made itself. I wouldn't leave. But I'd have to find somewhere to put the necklace, somewhere it couldn't incriminate me in any way.

The answer came to mind immediately. I would use

the same place that other item had been hidden. The commode in Gayle's room. It would be found and returned to Silvy and there would be nothing to suggest that it was I who had put it there; everyone in the house had free access to that room.

It didn't occur to me, then, that the one who had hidden the hammer would suspect the truth; that I had found the jewels and chosen the commode as a hiding place because I knew something had previously been hidden there.

For all the perceptiveness with which I credited myself, I felt relieved when the necklace was behind Gayle's door and I was safely in bed. Incredible as it seems, I did not suspect that I had now put myself in positive danger in this house, and I rolled over and went to sleep.

10

The necklace was found within minutes of the beginning of the search. It was Silvy herself who discovered it; her triumphant cry brought all of us out into the upper halls.

Olivia appeared, looking yellow and ill. The others were in various stages of dress, for Silvy had begun to look before breakfast. David, refreshed and immaculate in a short sleeved white shirt with blue slacks and sneakers, nodded smilingly at Silvy, then turned his attention to Olivia.

"Migraine again? Why don't you go back to bed and I'll get you something for it. The girls can cope with breakfast."

The twins moaned dramatically, Iola saying, "Speak for yourself, David!"

"All right, then, everybody get your own breakfast, but Olivia is in no condition to do anything."

"This is one necklace, but there are more than a

dozen other pieces," Silvy said loudly, recalling attention to herself. "Where's the rest of it? And what was the point of hiding it in the commode in Gayle's room?"

I wish it had been possible to watch all their faces, to have known what she was going to say. For there was a silence, an alertness which I recognized instinctively. I happened to be looking at David, and his reaction was more a lack of emotion than anything else. His smile crystallized and broke, leaving his face cold, devoid of anything.

By the time my eyes moved on to the others they, too, were guarded, except for Mrs. Montrain. She registered only her own personal misery of the pain within her skull.

"No doubt the rest of the stuff will turn up, too," Iona said, turning back toward her own room to finish dressing. "Vanessa, I'm going to be late. Fix me a bowl of cereal and some juice, will you, and I'll be right down."

Silvy's eyes smoldered as she gazed around at her family. "One of you put it there, you know. I didn't."

The group was breaking up, ignoring her; I wondered if her claim of having half a million dollars worth of precious stones could be true. Wouldn't they be somewhat concerned, if such an amount were unaccounted for?

"I found something else interesting, too," Silvy said, raising her voice so that everyone paused. "In Vanessa's room, under her pillow."

Vanessa gave a cry of rage, making a leap for her great-aunt so that David's hand shot out to intercept her.

"You had no right to be in my room! I didn't take any of your rotten old jewels!"

"Neither did Gayle, but the necklace was in her room." Silvy withdrew a small red leather bound book from one of the voluminous pockets of her smock. "This is the one everybody was looking for, after Gayle's death, isn't it? No wonder it couldn't be found! Vanessa had hidden it!"

She held it up, and I could see the letters in gold across the cover. *The diary of Gayle Montrain.* Of course, that was her professional name, but had it bothered David that she hadn't used her married name on a personal object like this? I could tell nothing from his face.

Vanessa made a lunge that broke free of David's grasp, snatching the diary out of Silvy's hand, clasping it to her heaving chest. Silvy made no attempt to retrieve it.

"It's mine! It belonged to my mother, and she told me when she died everything she had would be mine! You had no right to touch it!"

David did not take it from her, but he immobilized the child with a hand on her thin shoulder. "Vanessa, you know we looked for this, after Mommy died. Why didn't you tell us you had it?"

"I didn't find it until after the funeral," Vanessa said, her mouth sullen. "And it was nobody's business what was in it. She wouldn't have wanted everybody to read all her secret thoughts. Especially not the police."

"She's probably right there," Iola commented with a grimace. "Well, it didn't matter in the long run, did

it? The official verdict was accidental death, which was the best we could have hoped for."

Was it a warning glance Iona gave her? Iola swung around and moved down the hall, saying that she'd have to hurry or there wouldn't be time to eat. This time I watched them, to see who occupied those rooms nearest the head of the stairs.

The two closest to that intersection of corridors, opening into the main one, were Iona and Iola's rooms, directly across the hall from one another. Olivia's was just beyond Iola's. Any of the doors could have been the one which I had heard closing the night before.

Vanessa's face was moist with perspiration; her fingers dug into the soft leather cover of the book in her arms, and she faced her father defiantly. David, however, released her and gave her a push toward the head of the stairs. "Run along and get Aunt Iona's cereal, eh?"

The group did break up, then, leaving Silvy unsatisfied as to the whereabouts of the rest of her valuables. I returned to my room to find that Vanessa had followed me in.

"Yes? Was there something you wanted to say to me?" I went to the dressing table and began to brush my hair and apply the light makeup I customarily wore. I could see her sober reflection in the mirror before me.

"I thought maybe . . . maybe you'd hide it for me, until I can think of a better place. If everybody's going to be on a rampage, looking for Aunt Silvy's jewelry, I don't know where to put it in my room. I don't want them to read it. They didn't even like my

mother, they were jealous of her. They have no right to look into her heart."

I didn't take time to consider. "Certainly, Vanessa, if you like. I'm not sure where, though . . . they may search in here, too."

Her eyes fell on the bone leather bag on the edge of the dresser. "Maybe in your purse. Nobody could look there. It won't be for long, Sandi, I'll find another safe place for it."

"All right," I agreed, and opened the bag so that she could drop the diary into it.

She smiled her thanks, then rushed off to help with the breakfasts. I stood in the doorway watching her, wondering. Before I closed my door, David came out of Olivia's room with an empty hypodermic needle in his hand, nodding as he passed on down the hall.

I was left unsettled and tense. The temptation to look at Gayle's diary was overwhelming, but I put it down. The child had entrusted it to me because she didn't want the others to read it. I had even less right than they to do so. Was Vanessa right, that her sisters had not liked Gayle? What was more natural than that they, who looked so much like her and had as children been equally successful, should be envious of the sister who had approached stardom as an adult? They had both retained connections with the movie company for which she worked; did it gall them to be employed in such unspectacular jobs, when Gayle had been considered one of the hottest properties on the lot?

I finished with my lipstick and blotted it, then let myself out of the room and went downstairs. The twins and the children were in the kitchen, selecting from a

varied assortment of cold cereals assembled by Vanessa. I heard Iola's exclamation as I entered the room, followed by her laughter as she picked a bright plastic toy out of her bowl.

"For a minute I thought I'd discovered some more of Aunt Silvy's jewels, but it's only a top. Here, Willie, catch!"

It wasn't until the twins had gone that I dared to put the question into words. Willie was spinning the top and squealing when it went off the edge of the table, so I asked Vanessa.

"Does your Aunt Silvy have a great many jewels?"

"Oh, heaps of them. More than anyone else, even more than my mother has. Mama's are all put away for me, when I'm eighteen, Daddy said. I guess Aunt Silvy's got more than Gram and the twins put together, and they're more expensive ones. Her husband made an awful lot of money before he died, I guess."

"Have they ever disappeared before?"

"No, but she's always losing things. She forgets what she does with stuff. She even forgets which people are alive and which ones are dead. She keeps saying that Neil Garvin sent her an invitation to a premiere she's going to . . . poor Aunt Silvy."

"Why? I know his name, but I can't remember anything about Mr. Garvin."

"He's dead," Vanessa said pityingly, whether for my ignorance or for Garvin's death was uncertain. "He's been dead for almost as long as Mama has. Aunt Silvy went to his funeral, but she doesn't remember."

So much for being able to count on what Silvy said. I helped myself to a bowl of shredded wheat and ac-

cepted the strawberries Vanessa offered to put over them.

I had finished before David came down; I asked if he'd like me to scramble him some eggs, but he waved me back into my chair.

"No, cold cereal won't hurt me for once, on such a warm morning. You might pass me a cup of coffee, though. I'll have to run in to the hospital in an hour or so, but with any luck I'll be back by lunch time and get at those charts. How are they coming?"

"Well, I think, but slowly. I'm afraid I have to look up things like . . . like paracentesis and cephalop-opl—"

"Cephaloplegia," he provided as I continued to grope for the word. "Well, that was to be expected. All the good medical transcribers are working full time already; they aren't often available for fill-in work such as this, and I find it worthwhile to take any good transcriber to help me catch up during my vacations, rather than wait for my own girl to come back and then struggle for weeks with a backlog."

He looked rested this morning, fresh and alert, but I remembered the way he'd been last night.

"Don't you ever take a real vacation? Where you don't make hospital rounds or catch up on your dictation?"

"I did, before my wife died, on the rare occasions when we could both get away at the same time. I guess it's been . . . oh, five or six years, since I've taken a trip except to a medical convention. Don't look at me that way, I assure you this sort of vacation is most restful, after the usual pressures. I relax around the pool, and get in some archery practice with the kids.

I'll probably take a day off and spend it with Vanessa and Willie at Disneyland."

"That's no way to get any rest!" I protested, and he laughed.

"Well, no, because it's impossible to cram Disneyland into a single day but the kids love it, and I like to watch their faces. Listen, how about coming with us? Sit with me while they slide down the Matterhorn, which they love and I'd rather pass up?"

It was a casual invitation, carelessly given, but my heartbeat quickened. "I'd love to do that. I haven't been to Disneyland for ages, and that wasn't with youngsters. They are fun to watch, aren't they?"

We chatted amiably while he ate, but all the while, in the back of my mind, lurked the knowledge that I must tell him about the hammer. It was impossible to do so until the kids had gone, though; it would have to wait until we were alone.

When we rose I began to clear the table, but David stopped me. "No, let Van do it. You weren't hired as a maid of all work."

"I don't mind, if Mrs. Montrain is ill . . ."

"Vanessa can cope, can't you, babe? Olivia is subject to these things several times a year. I usually wind up giving her a shot that keeps her flat for a day or two, and then she's fine again. Sorry it had to happen while you're here, and Toni's out of commission, too. Maybe I can ask Emma to lend a hand over dinner. Silvy's not always easy to watch, but she might be induced to peel potatoes or something, to keep her busy. You never know with Silvy. One day she'll do anything you ask, and the next she remembers she

was Mrs. Rudy Montrain, and she wants to be waited on hand and foot."

I wanted to ask if he considered Silvy dangerous, if he considered her capable of violence, but that, too, was a question not to be put before the children.

We walked together toward the study and my mouth went dry again as I sought to frame the words I must say to him. And then I could not, for the telephone rang as we approached it, and again he was off in a hurry to the hospital; no time for questions or confidences.

"Is it Toni?" I asked tensely as he replaced the phone.

"No, one of my cardiac patients. I'll try for lunch, but don't wait for me. See you later."

He was gone, and I was left with a mountain of uncompleted charts. I worked steadily until noon, without interruptions. Intending to call the kids and suggest sandwiches, I saw that they were cavorting in the pool; the sunlit water was irresistible and I called out to them that I'd join them in a few minutes. Not many jobs carried the bonus of a swimming pool, and I might as well make the most of it.

I had changed into my suit and decided, in spite of the fact that most of the family were gone, to take my purse along with me to the poolside. I dropped my watch into the bag and then stood staring down at the red-covered diary.

The kids were in the pool below; I could see them from my window. Olivia was supposedly asleep, under the influence of whatever David had given her. Emma and Silvy wouldn't bother me; they were in their own quarters at the far end of the house.

I held the small book for a moment. I had no right to pry into someone else's diary, not even the diary of someone who was dead. Yet did not the things that had happened in this house put a different face on the situation? Something odd . . . something wrong . . . was going on, and no matter who was at the bottom of it David Campton stood to be hurt.

Did Gayle's death have anything to do with what was going on now? I didn't see how it could, for it had happened over a year ago and anything it was going to precipitate ought to have been long over with. Still, Vanessa had made the statement that her mother had committed suicide. According to Iola, the official verdict had been death by accident, "the best they could have hoped for," whatever that meant. Was it a family belief that Gayle had killed herself, and had they hoped or manipulated things in some way to prevent this from becoming public knowledge? There were many reasons why a family would prefer to have it thought a member had died accidentally rather than by her own hand,

Even as I thought these things, my fingers turned back the cover; it was too much for me. I had to know what was in Gayle Montrain's diary, and this was as good a chance as I would ever have to find out.

11

Gayle's writing was clear, school-girlish, easy to read. I skimmed, for the most of it was of little interest to anyone but herself. She mentioned people I didn't know, all of them by first names only, most of them actors and movie people she worked with. David's name cropped up regularly, usually in some routine connotation.

"David doesn't want to go, so Howard's taking me. I wish Dave got as much fun as I do out of the bright lights and the celebrities." "Poor Dave, he waited up for me until after two, but he was sound asleep when I got home and I didn't have the heart to wake him. I'm proud of what he is, and does, but I wish he didn't work such terrible hours, that never work out with mine. It would be fun to share a room again, as we did when we were first married, but we both have to have our sleep and it can't always be at the same time . . ." "Spent a marvelous evening at home

with David and the kids. What must it be like, to be able to do this all the time? There I go, pretending to be wistful that I'm not just a little haus frau, when I know I wouldn't give up being an actress for anything in the world . . ."

It wasn't hard to see why Vanessa valued the diary. There were many mentions of herself and Willie in it. Gayle, for all her preoccupation with and consuming interest in her own career, had adored her children. There were countless brief but touching remarks about them . . . Vanessa's approaching beauty, their cleverness, amusing things they'd said, concern about their teeth and their temperatures.

I flipped the pages more rapidly, feeling ashamed that I had allowed my curiosity to get the better of me under the guise of legitimate investigation. Gayle could have nothing to do with what had happened to Toni, Silvy's peculiarities, or anything going on in this house now.

The book was not filled. The last entry was dated June eleventh of last year, the day before she died. I read it in its entirety, because if Gayle had intended to kill herself there must be some sign of it in what she had undoubtedly considered to be her private writings.

There was an account of a quarrel on the set of the movie she was making, between the director and the male lead. She had sided with the director and been told off by the star, so that the entire day's shooting had been thrown off, wasted. Still, during the early evening the star had called her and apologized, so that hadn't been preying on her mind. She had had another of her rare quiet evenings at home, they had

laughed a lot, she and David had gone skinnydipping in the pool at one in the morning. Her last sentence declared that they had decided once her picture was finished they would take a week off and spend it in some secluded mountain area, just the two of them, to get a real rest and enjoy one another without the family around them.

I closed the book, mystified. Why had Vanessa felt her mother had killed herself? This diary was certainly not written by a neurotic woman, a desperate woman, an unhappy woman on the verge of taking her own life. On the contrary, she was on the way up, she loved her husband, enjoyed her children, looked forward to becoming a star of the first magnitude.

They had looked for the diary after Gayle's death, Silvy said. Did they expect it to give some clue as to why she might have killed herself? But if the official verdict was accidental death why did they think it had been suicide?

I replaced the book in my purse and noted with horror that it had been twenty minutes since I'd told the kids I would join them. Lucky for me, the kids had also lost track of the time, for they made no comment when I got there.

David did not appear for lunch. I went back to work feeling restless, disappointed, but not, at that point, particularly frightened. At least not for myself.

Olivia Montrain came down in midafternoon, still looking sallow and tired but with the lines of pain eased in her face. I heard her working in the kitchen and heard, also, Vanessa's protests when she was put into service.

Why didn't they get someone to replace Toni, I

wondered? For that matter, why did they attempt to run this large house with only one servant? Emma didn't count, for her job concerned only Silvy and her rooms. It seemed out of character for this elegantly gowned and coiffed woman to be working as hard as she must to keep up with things, when she wore jewels and probably Paris originals every day.

Silvy had remarked, several times, that they had tried to get her jewels away from her. Was this true, or only another flight of her aged imagination? She'd never said why they wanted them . . . for the money? . . . for their own use? All three of the other women in the house obviously delighted in wearing jewelry and valued it highly . . . except for Silvy's. Poor Silvy had had no help at all in searching for her missing valuables; she had continued on her own, I knew, but she had turned up nothing more.

When David finally arrived around four, it was the signal for all work to stop.

"It's Friday," he said, "and we always start our weekends early. Come on, the kids and I are going to have a workout on the archery range. Do you shoot?"

I let myself be enticed away from the stacks of charts. It was a relief to know that there would be other people around for a time, that I couldn't possibly try to talk to him about the hammer I had found.

Olivia, too, was drawn out of the kitchen . . . "Stick it in the oven and leave it, you're overdoing anyway," David told her. "Come sit in the shade if you're not up to shooting, you can keep Sandi company, unless she's going to shoot, too?"

I shook my head. "Not this time. I'll watch," I said,

although I couldn't imagine Olivia being ideal company to do that with.

They all carried bows, quivers, arrows, arm guards, finger tabs, and other paraphernalia out across the grass. We passed the swimming pool and the high hedge beyond it which concealed the garage—it was large enough to hold a dozen cars, although there were only two in it, now.

I had known the grounds were extensive, but not until we were away from the house did I realize that the land sloped back for such a distance, blending into the edge of a grove of orange trees. It appeared that the white stucco wall surrounded the grove as well as the ten or twelve acres of open land where we now stood. This part of the estate was not as well tended as the front lawns, for dry patches indicated that watering was not as regular or as thorough as would be necessary to keep it in perfect condition.

However, it was pleasant to be in the open in the heat of the late afternoon. They had set up their own range, with bales of straw and various targets posted on them, with markers to shoot from in distances of from twenty yards, for Willie, to eighty yards for adults.

Olivia and I stood in the shade of an ancient fig tree with enormous, dusty leaves, watching them. It was clear from the first that David was an excellent bowman; his orange and black fletched arrows unerringly found their mark close to the center of every target.

"Vanessa says you shoot, too," I observed to my companion, feeling uncomfortable in silence.

"I used to, a great deal," she admitted. "It's excellent exercise, but in the past year or so I haven't had time to keep at it regularly. It was our favorite family pastime, when Gayle was here . . ." Her voice trailed off, and I wondered what her relationship had been with that daughter. Was there envy on her part, too, or had she been the one to promote Gayle's career in the first place?

"Good shot!" David called out, and I turned to see that Vanessa had scored a bull's eye on the black and white target. I waved to show that I had noted and appreciated her feat.

When they moved on to the next target, that of a life-sized deer, David waved us on after them, and we stepped out into the heat of the sunlight and followed along the well-worn trail. It wasn't bad, as long as we didn't try to hurry, and there was no need for that; the children were slow about retrieving their arrows, and did as much jumping up and down as they did moving forward.

David offered to let me shoot his bow but I shook my head, laughing, knowing it was far too heavy for me to pull.

"Vanessa's, maybe," I suggested, "but I've forgotten how to handle a bow, I'm afraid."

"Van's is too light for you, but let's try it, anyway." Vanessa handed over her bow and I took it, awkwardly.

"I haven't done this since I was about fourteen," I confessed.

"Such a long time ago!" David said, amusement in his voice. "No, look, hold it this way."

He demonstrated, necessarily standing close to me,

positioning my feet and arms. His proximity was disconcerting, so that I forgot what I was supposed to be trying to do; I let one arrow escape without being aimed at the target.

"Hey, she's dangerous!" David shouted. "Go get that one, Willie, and then everybody stand behind her! Come on, Sandi, don't be self-conscious, try again."

This time I tried to forget the scent of his shaving lotion, to ignore the muscularity of the arms that touched my own in the demonstration of form. And while I was not wholly successful in this, I did manage to send the arrow in the direction of the target, falling only a few feet short of it.

"OK, now you're getting the range. Raise it a little, try again," David encouraged, handing me another arrow.

This time he stood well back, and I not only reached the target, I put the arrow squarely in the rump of the pictured deer, which drew cheers from the onlookers. Not from Olivia, naturally; as I reached for the next arrow I glanced in her direction and saw that she stood with lips compressed, eyes shaded by a hand so that it was impossible to read her expression. Was she only feeling the effects of her recent migraine again, combined with the heat, or did she disapprove of me? Did she, like her daughters, harbor hopes of keeping David in the family? Did she resent any attention he might give to anyone outside that tight little circle?

We had progressed to the fourth target when there was a shout from behind us, and we turned to see one of the twins approaching. I couldn't tell, from this

distance, which one of them it was. She wore fresh shorts and shirt and moved with a springy, athletic stride.

"Hi! Am I too late to challenge the champ?" It was Iola. Her face lit in a grin which seemed to take us in as a group, yet when she joined us I felt excluded; her eyes never met mine.

"I've been giving Sandi a few lessons," David said easily. "I think we could make an archer out of her, if we all give her a hand."

"I'd be glad to teach her a few things," Iola said, still smiling. "But for right now how about a match for the rest of the range?"

"All right, if Sandi doesn't mind shooting with the kids for a while?" He said it with a faint air of apology, and I nodded, forcing my own smile.

"By all means, go ahead. You don't want to be held back by a rank amateur."

"We'll have some more lessons tomorrow," he promised, and then they were gone.

I watched them, admiring Iola's form and performance as well as her trim figure; her long hair was caught up with a ribbon to keep it off her neck, making her look younger than she was. She had very neatly slipped David away from me, in such a practiced manner that I knew she had often done it before, with other girls.

I'd be glad to teach her a few things, she'd said. Maybe it was just that living with the Montrains for a few days had given me a nasty, suspicious turn of mind, but I couldn't help feeling that she might have meant more than pointers about archery.

"I believe I'll go back to the house," Olivia mur-

mured beside me. Perspiration beaded her face, and her skin had a grayish tinge under the yellow. "I'm afraid I've become addicted to air-conditioning during hot days."

"Will you be all right alone, or would you like me to walk back with you? Or shall I call Dr. Campton?"

"No, no, I'll be all right." She moved off, slowly, across the open hillside toward the hedge that hid the house.

I had felt no sense of companionship with Olivia, but without her I felt stranded. Ahead of me Iola and David were pulling their arrows out of a target, laughing, arguing about their scores. Willie and Vanessa shouted to me to watch them, and I did, but David wasn't aware of me. That wasn't surprising. The girl beside him was lovely, her dark head thrown back so that her face caught the sun with its infectious smile.

I had enjoyed the early part of the outing, but the sense of well being dissipated as I followed the others around the course. I was glad when the last target had been shot, and we all headed back to the house.

"Now we swim, right, Daddy?" Willie asked. Dirt and sweat smudged his narrow little face, and David laughed, ruffling his hair.

"All right, but I think it would be a good idea if you showered first, or you'll pollute the pool. You'll come swimming, too, won't you, Sandi?"

He held out a hand to help me up the steep bank by the hedge, and as I accepted it and his invitation I saw Iola behind me. For an instant malevolence showed clearly on her face, and then it was gone and I was unsure of what I had seen.

I honestly think I did try to find an opportunity to

talk to David about the hammer I had found in Gayle's room. But all afternoon and evening we were surrounded, if not by Iola and Iona, who came home at dinner time, then by the children. David pointedly included me in all conversation and activities; Iona and Iola, more subtly, tried to cut me out; they certainly succeeded in making me feel awkward and embarrassed. I didn't think David was aware of what they were doing, or that it was a planned attack. They were experts at it, and I suspected they'd been fending off predatory females, or any females, for some time.

They sometimes worked together at it, although at other times they were at sword's points with one another. Before the evening was over I had no doubt that both of them wanted David, but they were united in the project of keeping anyone else away from him.

Once I found Vanessa regarding me speculatively, and I forced a smile and asked if I had dirt on my face.

"No," she answered seriously. "I was just wondering . . . Aunt Iola and Aunt Iona seem to be working on you, and they usually only do that with very pretty girls. I don't mean you're homely, of course, but you're not . . . not . . ."

"Not a beauty, like your mother was," I had to admit ruefully. "Did they do it with your mother?"

Vanessa laughed. "No. She was quicker than they were, and she always had all the men around her. Daddy only laughed and said that was what came of having a beautiful movie star for a wife, but the twins were jealous. I suppose it's only natural, because when they were little girls they were all three in the movies, but when they grew up only Mama was. I guess

I'd be jealous, too, if it were me. Why are they jealous of you, though, Sandi?"

"I'm sure I don't know," I said, but my pulse quickened. Did they do this sister act automatically, with every female? Or only with the ones in whom David evinced some interest? Did they see some indication that he was interested in me, or was that only wishful thinking on my part and general caution on theirs?

We went up to bed as a group, except for Olivia, who had retired shortly after dinner. It was almost as if no one trusted anyone else to go alone; we must all stay together as long as possible, to prevent any twosomes from forming. Goodnights, sounding more cordial than I could believe they were, sounded along the corridors, and I was glad to withdraw to the cool quiet room I had been assigned.

It was late enough to retire, but I wasn't sleepy. This house bothered me, the people in it bothered me. Granted, David Campton was attractive and friendly and would, if gotten away from the Montrains, make a marvelous husband. It was too soon to give any serious thought to such a thing, and besides, I wasn't the type to go fighting for a man, not openly, the way the twins were doing. If a man wanted me, at least the first move would have to come from him, and if David were interested enough to want to see me, he knew where I lived in the city, didn't he? He was a big boy, perfectly capable of taking his own destiny into his own hands, of calling a girl and ignoring the unreasonable demands of a family that was not, actually, his own.

I turned down the bed and got out my nightgown, and as I turned toward the bathroom a small move-

ment caught my eye at the bottom of the door into the hall. An envelope had been slipped silently through the crack.

I stared at it, wondering what trickery the mad Montrains were up to now. That was my initial thought, that it must be a prank of some sort, and at first I considered disregarding it. Serve them right, whatever they were trying to do, if I simply poked it back through the crack and pretended I'd never seen it.

I actually knelt and touched it with my fingers, intending to do just that, but my curiosity was too strong. Forgetting what that characteristic is said to do to cats, I changed my mind and picked it up, slitting the flap with a fingernail.

It was a sheet of the small sized personal correspondence stationery from David's study. The note was hastily written in a sprawling hand.

"Sandi: Didn't want to wake you if you'd gone to sleep, but we never did get a chance to talk tonight. Would you enjoy a midnight dip? Meet you at the pool in twenty minutes." It was signed with a single capital D.

I laughed at how close I had come to ignoring the only interesting suggestion that had been made to me today, and dropped the note on the dresser. I had been ready for a bath, but a swim would be more fun.

I was ready in less than twenty minutes, but there seemed little point in sitting in my room waiting for the big hand to move around to midnight. Draping a big towel over my shoulders, moving soundlessly on bare feet, I let myself out into the hallway.

A small nightlight burned at the baseboard outlet

near the top of the stairs; another one marked the playroom door, in the other direction. I hesitated, feeling unwilling to go down those front stairs, remembering what had happened to Toni there.

Well, the kids had showed me where the back stairs were, and it was closer that way, anyhow, I reasoned. I didn't turn on any lights; it seemed that all the stairs were marked top and bottom with those small blue-glowing globes.

I saw no one, heard nothing, on my passage through the darkened house. The back door was unlocked, as I had expected. It was unlikely that an intruder would come through those locked gates, past the watchful eye of the ancient Eli.

The pool glowed with its own blue-green light, cool and inviting. There was no sign of David, but of course I was early.

The night was warm. The tiles around the pool retained some of the day's heat although it had been dark for hours. I poised on the edge of the pool, then dove and swam across the width of it. I wasn't a strong enough swimmer to attempt the full length of it, as David and Iona had done.

The water was warm, too, and it was strangely exhilarating to swim at night, looking down into the lighted depths. Or was it exhilaration from another source? I looked forward to talking to David without one of his sisters-in-law insinuating herself between us.

I started to swim back across the deep end of the pool, and suddenly with no warning, the lights went out.

For a moment I forgot to stroke and got a mouthful of chlorinated water. I began to tread water, lifting my

head, trying to make out any human form in the surrounding darkness.

"David? Are you there?"

After looking into the brilliance of the pool, I could see nothing. The water, which had only seconds ago seemed so warm, was now cold and I felt goosebumps rising on my arm.

I thought I heard a small sound behind me at the extreme deep end. I swiveled effortlessly, calling out again, "Is that you, David?"

There was no answer, and it was then, belatedly, that I felt genuine alarm.

A moment later I knew there was a reason for my fear. Beneath the blackness of the water a hand closed firmly around my right ankle and began to pull me down as if into a gigantic vat of ink.

I kicked out against it but the hand was strong and didn't loosen its grip; as panic overwhelmed me I realized that I was struggling for my life.

12

The darkness and the complete silence . . . except for my own blood thundering in my ears . . . combined with fear to defeat me. I had gone under without time to suck in a deep breath; already my chest was aching as I was dragged downward.

I knew the pool was ten feet deep here; I would have sworn I went down twice that far. Over my head there was nothing but blackness . . . I might have been a hundred feet down for all I could see . . . or for all the air I could get.

The first blinding panic receded; I knew this was only another human being . . . almost certainly another female . . . from whom I must escape, and in a matter of seconds. I kicked again, viciously, with my left foot; I struck something solid (a head?) but the hold was not loosened.

I pulled against the pressure with all my strength, arms striving to reverse my direction, and my fingers

brushed something hard, metallic. The ladder at the side of the pool, I thought, and grabbed again in that direction, a hand closing over one of the rungs.

Without the ladder I might not have done it, but with it to pull against I was able to resist the strength in that arm. Surely she, too, needed air? I wondered desperately, and using both hands hauled myself up rung by rung the necessary distance until my head broke water.

I gave a convulsive final upward pull; abruptly my ankle was released and I sucked oxygen into my lungs, painfully, continuing to move up and out of the water, to flop onto the tile in a cold, shuddering heap.

As my breathing slowed at last, reason reasserted itself. Someone had tried to drown me, and perhaps she was still there in the inky pit that was the pool. My eyes were becoming used to the darkness, now, and I could pick out the lighter area of tile around the water, the darker shape of a nearby picnic table, other shapes that were deck chairs.

Nothing moved. I heard no sound except the water dripping from my body onto the tile and my own rasping breath.

I had, momentarily, thought the lights had burned out. Now I knew that someone had simply flicked a switch and silently slipped into the water with me.

What a fool I had been! Coming down here so unsuspectingly! Thinking David had left me a note! David hadn't lured me here, someone else had . . . the same someone who had struck at Toni, and washed a bloody hammer in my bathroom, and hidden it in Gayle's commode. How I had gotten onto her list I wasn't sure, but on the list I obviously was.

Out there in the pool someone came to the surface.

I wasn't sure how I knew, for she made very little noise. I held my breath, although I was still sufficiently oxygen-starved to want to breathe greedily, and listened.

I had been aware of a bone-deep chill, shivering as the evening air dried my skin. Now anger stirred a warmth, starting in the pit of my stomach and spreading through my limbs, carrying with it a returning strength.

Water dripping, as if from a head poised above the surface of the pool. Such a small sound, but close, only a few feet away.

One part of me wanted to run but another part wanted to find a weapon and fight. Face down this enemy, put a stop to the strange happenings in this house, for David's sake as well as my own.

The picnic table behind me appeared in memory's eye, as it had been earlier in the day while we were swimming. There had been a towel left there, and a magazine, and . . . what else? Anything I could use?

I couldn't remember. I began to inch toward it until my hand encountered solid wood, feeling along the table top, getting silently to my feet. Although I couldn't see anything, I kept my face turned toward the pool, hoping that if a figure emerged from the water I might be able to detect the movement.

There was a garment on the table; I heard its buttons click softly against the wood. A jacket. A lightweight seersucker jacket David had been wearing when he went to the hospital to make rounds.

Something sagged heavily in one pocket and I

searched it out, finding unexpected treasure. A flashlight.

I couldn't believe it. It might not be of much use as a weapon, for either attack or defense, but it would assuredly put my attacker at a disadvantage for a few seconds if I were to spotlight her with it.

The thing was, I decided, excited now and no longer afraid, to pick the exact moment when she was coming out of the water and shine the light full in her face. What I would do after that point I hadn't figured out, but I was confident of thinking of something.

I huddled beside the picnic table, secure in my belief that if I couldn't see her, neither could she see me. She must be wondering where I was and what I was doing; maybe she was considering having another try at me, her mind racing as mine was.

I held the little flashlight, praying that David hadn't brought it home simply to replace worn out batteries. Listening, again I heard the soft lap of water against tile as someone moved.

Coming out this end of the pool, or the other end? It seemed to me the sounds were very close. If she intended to make another pass at me, it would be quieter to approach me here, from the water, than to get out and come around the pool. There must be the chance, in her mind, that I was winded, still incapacitated; for all the thinking I'd done, and the furtive moving about, very little time had elapsed since I'd climbed out of the pool.

The surge of water as she moved to the ladder was unmistakable, although if I'd been much further away I would never have heard it. My thumb was ready on the switch of the flashlight.

By holding my own breath, I could hear hers. Not far away, not more than five or six feet of tile separated us, and I knew she was starting up the ladder.

I turned on the light, and this time the stoppage of breath was involuntary. What faced me might have been some monster from sixty fathoms: hair covered by a black bathing cap, eyes magnified and blurred by thick goggles, a face mask and one of those small back tanks providing oxygen, which explained why my attacker had been able to stay submerged so much longer than I.

For a matter of seconds the figure froze, perhaps blinded by the flashlight, and then, so quickly that I did not even move to dodge it, an arm flew up and something . . . a spear? . . . was thrown at me.

Too late, I threw the metal flashlight, but I never knew whether or not it hit its mark. The light vanished into the depths of the pool, the figure on the ladder went over backward and under, and I felt a searing pain in my left shoulder. I felt it cautiously, expecting a gaping wound; there was only a narrow groove which stung at the touch of my fingers.

I took a few tentative steps along the edge of the pool, but my friend was a good swimmer and she had the cover of nearly total darkness. I heard her scramble out at the far end, but I was no longer in a mood for hand to hand combat, and it would take that to determine who she was.

Delayed shock struck me then; I moved, an automaton, toward the door, but I was afraid to go into the house. In there, in darkness deeper than this, lurked more danger for me, and my fear returned.

Had my adversary entered the house? I couldn't tell.

I hadn't heard any sounds after the subdued splashing announced that she was leaving the pool. Why hadn't I held on to the light a moment longer, why hadn't I made some attempt to see what sort of bathing suit she wore, anything to give me a clue to her identity?

"Who's there?"

The voice struck me dumb, although I ought to have realized that anyone asking that wasn't the person with whom I'd struggled in the water.

"What's happened to the lights? They can't all have burned out at once." There was the flick of a switch, inside the kitchen doorway, and the pool bloomed like a giant aquatic flower, beautiful and sinister although it was now empty of demons. Silvy stood there, wrapped in a cotton terry robe, her head a mass of red-gold curls.

"Oh, it's you, Sandi. I wondered if anyone else would be swimming . . . it's such a perfect night."

I couldn't speak to her, not just yet. The wig could cover her own wet hair, and it was impossible to tell what the heavy terry robe concealed . . . a wet suit, perhaps? Could it have been Silvy? Would she have had time to get out of the skin diving gear and into a wig?

"You aren't going in, are you? Did you want the overhead lights on, too? The switch is right here. Was it you who turned off the underwater lights? We always leave them on, it's dangerous otherwise, David says."

It was dangerous, all right. I could testify to that. I shivered, and Silvy reached back to activate the other switch, the one which brought on four large spotlights

at the corners of the pool. The light made me blink and cast grotesque shadows around us.

Silvy squinted toward me. "What's the matter with your shoulder? Good heavens, it's bleeding, how did you do that?" She didn't wait for an answer. "We'd better get David to have a look at it."

Now that I could see it, I had to agree. It was a nasty gash, for all that it was not deep.

Silvy went back into the house, turning on lights as she moved. "Come and sit down here, I'll get him," she offered, and I was glad to sink onto a kitchen chair.

It was only now beginning to sink in, that someone in this house had actually tried to kill me. If it hadn't been for the chance encounter with the ladder I would probably be floating face down out there right now. The trembling ran through me so that it would have been impossible to have gone to David by myself.

Silvy was back quickly with David, who was still fully dressed. He moved toward me, face concerned.

"What the devil happened, Sandi? Fall against something? Silvy says the lights got turned out somehow, did you trip?"

I couldn't answer; for the first time in my life I understood how it was possible to be physically unable to speak, although my throat worked with the effort of trying.

"Silvy, look through my bag there and get me some antiseptic. Yes, that's it. I don't think it needs any sutures, it isn't deep, but we'd better try some butterflies on it. There's a chance you might have a scar from it, though."

Twenty minutes ago, I thought, there was a good chance I'd be having a funeral. A scar didn't seem bad, by comparison.

He cleaned the gash with something that made it sting anew, then began to fashion butterflies out of Band-Aids. "Probably you ought to have a tetanus booster. How long since you've had one?"

I shook my head, forcing my tongue to respond. "Can't . . . remember."

"Well, I haven't got any with me, but I'll pick some up tomorrow. We used to have a rule about no swimming alone, but since the kids have become such good swimmers we've relaxed the rules somewhat . . . they tend to police one another. Do you know what you did this on?"

"A spear, I think."

"Spear?" He looked up into my face, his fingers pressing the final tape butterfly into place.

"This one," Silvy said. I hadn't realized she'd gone outside. She held up the long handled spear. "It's got blood on it, all right. Some idiot left it lying around loose."

They both took it for granted that I had simply fallen onto it in some way, although it seemed to me that would have called for some fancy contortions on my part.

"What . . . is it?"

"For spear fishing. That's another family hobby, although I haven't had time to indulge in it much lately. It's a great sport, skin diving. Ever try it?"

I shuddered, remembering what it felt like to be the victim, and he patted my bare shoulder reassuringly.

"You're a little shaky; you want something to help you sleep?"

I shook my head. The last thing I wanted was to be lying in drugged slumber when my friend in the mask put in her next appearance. What I really wanted was to call a cab and go home.

"Better get on up to bed, then. I don't think that will give you any long range trouble. You aren't going to swim alone, are you, Silvy? Where's Emma?"

"Asleep. Yes, I'm going in for a few minutes. I'll be all right, I've been swimming alone for years. Good night, all."

David closed his bag and stretched out a hand to pull me up. "Come on, I'll walk you upstairs. I'd better wake Emma, though she'll have to stay out of sight. Silvy won't swim in the daytime any more; she doesn't want anyone to see her in a suit. I guess she was a knockout, fifty years ago, but the years haven't been particularly kind to Silvy."

We walked through the quiet house and up the front stairs; he left his bag on the hall table beside the telephone and continued to hold my hand, commenting on its coldness. I was glad of the contact with someone warm and strong, one who had definitely not been that monster in the pool. No, it hadn't been a man, but it might have been any of the women in this house.

In the upper hall, where we must part company to go to our own rooms, we paused. David took both my hands, squeezing them lightly.

"I suspect you're a bit shocky, and you've gotten chilled, but a good night's sleep will put you right.

Sorry I didn't know you wanted a swim, I'd have gone with you. Goodnight, Sandi."

"Goodnight," I said through stiff lips. I disliked the thought of walking even such a short remaining distance alone.

Abruptly, the door nearest us opened and light streamed out toward us, catching our clasped hands. Iona stood there, a towel wrapped around her head, a revealing negligee trailing about her.

"Oh, it's you. I thought I heard Iola."

"What are you doing up? I thought you went to bed ages ago," David told her.

"I had to wash my hair. Been swimming?" Her blue eyes rested upon me, but the light was at her back and I could read nothing in her face. "Looks like you had an accident."

"Nothing serious," David said. "Well, goodnight, girls. See you at breakfast. Oh, Sandi, we don't work on weekends, and breakfast is any time you like it, up to noon. So don't feel you have to get up if you'd rather sleep late."

He dropped my hands and strode off toward his own room, while Iona gave me an enigmatic nod and closed her door.

Washing her hair? Or skin diving in a darkened pool? I wished I could think of some excuse to see whether Iola's hair was dry, and Olivia's, and Emma's, and yes, Silvy's, under that absurd wig. But it was well after midnight and I could think of no excuse to knock on any of their doors.

I let myself into what should have been sanctuary, but was not. The door on the far side of the bathroom could be locked with one of those little buttons in the

doorknob, but the one from my room into the main corridor had no key or lock. I decided to put a chair in front of it, hoping that if anyone tried to enter I would hear it moved and have some warning.

It was not until I had shed my wet bathing suit and donned a dry nightgown that I remembered "David's" note and went to look at it again. It did not surprise me very much to find that it was gone.

It wasn't exactly astonishing to discover, too, that Gayle's diary was missing from my handbag.

I wouldn't stay here any longer, I thought wearily, getting into bed. I'd had enough of Montrain and all its sinister occupants. I liked David, and I didn't want to leave him in a predicament, but there were limits; I drew the line at putting my life in further jeopardy. Tomorrow, I was leaving.

13

Far from being able to sleep late in the morning, I was awake at dawn. Indeed, I scarcely slept at all, for every slight sound brought me bolt upright, heart hammering, expecting another attack with a spear or a hammer, or maybe, this time, a knife.

Nothing happened, however. It was only ten past six when I decided I could stay in bed no longer; exhausted though I was, there would be no more rest for [illegible]

I got up and dressed in shorts and a thin blouse. I would pack and call a cab and get old Eli to let me out through the gate, but first I needed a cup of strong, hot coffee.

The first cup was so good I was having a second when David came into the kitchen, padding quietly on bare feet; I didn't hear him until he spoke, nearly sending me into a fit.

"What are you doing up so early? It's Saturday, re-

member?" Then he got a look at my face, which showed dark smudges under the eyes. "Say, did you sleep at all? Is that laceration giving you some pain?"

I shook my head, feeling quite cowardly now that the moment had come to speak out once and for all. "No. It's a little stiff, that's all. But I didn't sleep much. Dr. Campton, I've been trying to talk to you for several days, and what I have to say isn't easy . . ."

His gray eyes were keen. They bored into mine for a few seconds, and then he reached for a cup and the coffee pot. "OK. But it can't be as bad as you think."

"I'm afraid it's worse. I can't stay here any longer, I'd appreciate it if you'd tell Eli to let me out the front gates and I'll take a taxi . . ."

"Hey, whoa! You're starting at the wrong end of your story! I thought the work was going all right, so it must be something else. You haven't tangled with one of the twins, have you? They're spoiled brats, and thoughtless, but they're harmless."

I couldn't repress a shudder. "Someone in this house isn't harmless, Dr. Campton. One of them . . ." I swallowed and then spat it out, ". . . one of them tried to kill me last night."

The movement of his chest stopped for a perceptible few seconds, then resumed its normal rise and fall. He wore a t-shirt and bathing trunks and sat leaning his forearms on the edge of the table, looking at me.

He reached over and pushed aside the collar of my shirt, looking at the angry red line across my shoulder and collar bone.

"This wasn't an accident." He was accepting that, I

thought gratefully. No wild protestations or denials that it could be possible.

"No. Someone pushed a note under my door. It suggested we meet for a midnight swim, and it was signed with a capital D. I went down and was in the pool when all the lights went off. Someone . . . someone joined me, very quietly, and tried to pull me down, tried to drown me. They would have succeeded if I'd been a few inches further away from the ladder." Telling it made the whole thing extremely vivid in my mind, and goose bumps again rose on my arms. He noticed them and dropped his hand to cover mine on the table.

"I got away by pulling on the ladder. There was a flashlight in the jacket you'd left on the picnic table, and I heard . . . her . . . coming out of the water a few feet away from me, so I shined the light in her face."

His fingers curled about mine, warm and comforting. "You saw who it was, then."

"No. Only that it was a woman, I'm sure of that, the shoulders were too narrow to have been a man. She wore one of those skin diving masks, and a black bathing cap. She was carrying that spear thing when she came up, and she threw it at me, and then went off backward into the water. She got away, and I didn't see any more. But she meant to kill me. She was prepared to stay under water longer than I could without a mask. She almost made it."

He swore, softly, almost under his breath. "Sandi . . . my God, what can I say? Why didn't you tell us last night?"

"I couldn't . . . talk . . . last night."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "You mean you thought it was Silvy?"

"I don't know. There's no more reason to suspect Silvy than any of the others, is there? I couldn't be sure of anything except that it was a woman. And with the wall around this place, and the locked gates, it had to be one of the women living here, didn't it?"

He didn't reply to that, but his sigh was eloquent.

"So you see why . . . I can't stay here. I don't . . . don't want to die, Dr. Campton."

"And you aren't going to. Sandi, there must be something more to this than you've told me. Have you any clues? Any hint of why, if not who? Have you had trouble with anyone?"

I could scarcely tell him that the twins were after him and they didn't want me around him. But I could mention the other things.

"I can't be sure. But I was with Toni the night before she . . . got hurt . . . and someone was listening to our conversation when we went upstairs. I heard a door close. I can't remember exactly what we said, but I'd asked about the family . . . the Montrains . . . and she said she'd tell me about them, or something to that effect. And she wasn't injured by the fall downstairs. There was nothing she could have hit her head on to make that wound. I think I found . . . what was used."

I wished I could gauge his reaction to all this, but like most doctors he was adept at controlling his facial muscles. Except for the fact that his mouth had gone flat and tight, there was nothing to indicate any of this was distressing to him.

"What is it?" he wanted to know.

"A hammer. It . . . it was washed off in my bathroom . . . the bathroom between my room and . . . and Gayle's. I noticed the water in the basin, it was slightly . . . bloody. There was a trail into Gayle's room. The hammer was in the commode, beside the bed."

"I think I'd better see that." He began to push back his chair.

My voice was small. "It's gone now. I didn't take it out, I intended to tell you but there didn't seem to be a chance when the kids weren't around, or . . . anyway, it's gone."

"And the note supposedly written by me?"

"That's gone, too," I admitted miserably. I drew in a deep breath. "And you might as well know that Gayle's diary is missing, too."

"Gayle's diary? Did you have that, too?"

"Vanessa gave it to me, to carry in my purse until she could think of a safer place to hide it, she said. It was taken at the same time the note was taken. While I was . . ." I couldn't say *waiting for you.* ". . . in the pool last night, before . . . *she* showed up."

"And you have no clue as to who it was, the woman who attacked you in the pool?"

"No. Only that she seemed quite at home underwater, with skin diving equipment."

He sighed. "Not much of a clue there. Iona and Iola are the ones who go regularly these days, but both Silvy and Olivia have done skin diving, too."

"Not Emma?"

"Emma? I shouldn't think so, although I couldn't swear to that."

"She was very strong." That hand on my ankle,

pulling me downward into the dark water . . . I would always remember the relentless strength behind it. "Until I caught hold of the ladder she was pulling me down without much difficulty. She could easily have held me under long enough . . ."

"This is an athletic family . . . they're all active, physically in good shape. Even Silvy is, for her age. Sandi, I don't know what to say about this. I'm . . . appalled, horrified."

Anyone would have been, of course, and I thought he was sincere. And yet there was something . . . could it be that he was not as *surprised* as I had expected?

"So you see why . . . I feel I have to leave."

Resolution formed and solidified behind the gray eyes. "Sandi, I can certainly understand how you feel, but I hope you'll reconsider. I need you, and you're doing a fine job . . . I've glanced through the finished charts and am very pleased with them. I also like you, personally, and I wish you'd stay. I'm afraid things are going on at Montrain which we thought we'd . . . well, gotten under control. If you'll stay on I can pretty well guarantee that nothing like this will happen again."

"Do you know who attacked me? And nearly killed Toni?"

"I promise you I'll find out, and see that it doesn't happen again," he said, but I had the strong feeling that he already had a suspect in mind. "Please stay, Sandi."

I'm not sure what I would have said, if he hadn't again reached across the table and taken my hand. This was the firm, assured touch of a man able to con-

trol not only himself but those around him, and the assurance flowed through his fingers into mine.

"Look, you apparently spent a sleepless night, and I can see why. But there's no reason for you not to lock your door and nap until noon, if you like. While you're doing that, I'll get to the bottom of things."

He was taking it for granted that I had capitulated to his request; it would have been doubly difficult at this stage of things to have insisted on leaving, and while he was touching me, half-smiling that way, I knew that I didn't actually want to go.

"There's no . . . no key to my room," I said, embarrassed and yet still afraid to stay without being able to feel secure there.

"No? I'm sure Olivia has one. I'll get it. In the meantime, why don't you go back to bed? Do you want a sleeping pill? I don't usually hand them out carelessly, but you've had a bad shock."

"No, I don't want anything. Are . . . are you going to tell Mrs. Montrain what I've told you?"

He frowned. "Perhaps not all of it, but enough so that some changes will be made. Come on, I'll walk up with you."

And so I stayed, because my heart was caught up with David Campton's, and I wanted to believe he could keep me safe.

The letter came in the morning mail; it was handed to me when I went downstairs around noon. It was a reply to my note to my friend Carol Thomas, with a request for particulars about Gayle Montrain's death.

"Dear Sandi," she wrote. "What marvelous adventure are you up to? The enclosed are sent along with

the provision that the minute you get back in town you will come by and give me all the fascinating details! You will see that I've been lucky enough to get the clippings themselves, so I don't have to interpret anything for you. (For the first time in my life I can see some sense to my mother's horrible habit of saving newspapers for years on end!) There's a picture of the bereaved husband . . . is he the one you're working for? Wow! Lots of luck, Carol."

I withdrew to the quiet coolness of the study to take out the clippings. I recalled having seen the enlarged front page picture of Gayle, a professional photograph and probably touched up, but incredibly lovely, smiling out of the newspaper page. There was a smaller one of David, taken in happier days, and a third of the Montrain sisters as children.

Starlet dies in high speed crash. I read through the initial story, which seemed straightforward enough. She had been driving alone, around midnight, and her car had gone out of control on a curve not far from her home. She had been killed instantly.

She was survived by her husband, David, children Vanessa and William, etc. etc.

Had someone said the police had wanted to see the diary, or had it only been implied? David had said, "You know we looked for this, after Mommy died," and Vanessa had replied, "She wouldn't have wanted everybody to read all her secret thoughts. Especially not the police."

I could find nothing in the newspaper clipping to indicate that there was anything peculiar about Gayle's death. No hint of suicide, no suggestion that she had been drinking or under the influence of drugs

at the time of the crash. It had apparently been accepted by everyone as an accidental death.

Why, then, had they searched for the diary? I could understand why Vanessa treasured it and kept it hidden once it had fallen into her hands, for there were many passages in her mother's hand showing how much Gayle had loved her children, how proud she was of them. It was all Vanessa had left of the essence of Gayle, and she wanted to keep it to herself.

Who had taken it from my purse? Not Vanessa, I was sure; she would simply have asked to have it back. No, it had been taken by the same person who retrieved the note supposedly written by David, and I had no doubt that this was also the same person who had tried to drown me.

Had the diary been taken out of nothing more than curiosity? Or was there a more sinister reason than that? Had someone hoped to find information in it, or to suppress something that Gayle had written?

But if the diary entered into this present mystery, did that mean that Gayle's death was part of it, too? If it were an accidental death I didn't see how that could be.

I wished I had read everything in the diary, instead of only skimming it. Vanessa presumably had done so, but if it contained anything significant it had evidently not caught her attention.

I might have pondered longer over this, but as I returned the clippings to the envelope I heard Willie yelling at the top of his voice.

Stepping into the hallway, I was in time to collide with his grubby little figure; his hands made dusty

marks on my shorts as he raised an excited face to [illegible].

"I found them, all of them!" he cried, and held up a paper bag.

Unsuspecting, I looked into it and blinked. Silvy's jewels! I could believe they were insured for half a million dollars. I had never imagined such a fabulous collection . . . diamonds, rubies, sapphires, pearls . . .

The twins came along the hall, having just had a work out on the tennis courts judging by their costumes and their rackets.

"What is it? Did Silvy's jewels turn up?" Iola asked, peering into the bag Willie held for their inspection. "I knew they would, she'd only put them somewhere . . . Where were they, Willie?"

"In my tire swing! Inside the tire! Aunt Silvy! I found them, I found them!"

He spun away from us and ran for the stairs, to be met at the halfway point by Silvy and Emma, coming down.

Silvy clasped them to her scrawny breast and stared down at us angrily. "I know you all think I put them there and forgot them, but I didn't!"

"But why would anyone hide them in the swing?" Iola asked reasonably, swinging her tennis racket against her leg. "If anyone wanted to take them, Silvy, it would be because of their value. They'd be taken off the estate, wouldn't they? Not just hidden?"

In a surge of bitter suspicion, Silvy scooped out a handful of the sparkling stones. Her face contorted, she descended the remaining steps, thrusting the angled

mass of necklaces and bracelets at me, because I was the closest.

"Look at that! Fakes! All of them, fakes! Just like that junk Iona makes for the movies! Anyone could tell those aren't diamonds!"

They looked like diamonds to me, but I'd never had any, so who was I to know?

Iona glanced at them casually. "I'll trade you anything you like for them, Aunt Silvy. The diamond Daddy gave me for my fifteenth birthday? Or my pearls?"

Iola took up the refrain. "Trade them to me, Aunt Silvy . . . I'll give you everything in my jewel box for that sapphire pendant."

Rage twisted her poor old face under the incongruous fluff of yellow hair, and in a violent motion she flung the jewels, bag and all, across the hallway. I watched, stunned, as what must be a priceless ruby earring skidded under the telephone table and a carved gold bracelet rolled drunkenly between Willie's legs.

"They're trash, nothing but trash!" Silvy shrieked, and began to weep. Emma put a comforting arm around her shoulders and urged her into a sitting room to drop onto a sofa. I could hear her sobbing, heartbroken as a child deprived of her dearest treasure.

Iona looked down at the scattered briliants and spoke dryly to Willie. "Pick them up, Willie, and put them back in the bag. She'll forget about this by tomorrow, if Emma puts them back into her jewel box. Poor old Silvy, I hope I drop dead before I get to that stage."

"Me, too," her sister agreed, and they stepped around the fallen jewelry and went up the stairs, leaving Willie and me to gather it up.

I had agreed to stay, but I couldn't help wondering just how well David was going to be able to control things in this odd household, in spite of his promises.

14

When told about Silvy's outburst, David sighed and asked to see the jewels. Willie brought them, solemn faced, and David dumped a few out onto his big palm.

"They look like diamonds to me," he said, pouring them back. "Poor Silvy, she makes more misery for herself."

Only for herself? I thought.

"Oh, Olivia," David said, swinging around as Mrs. Montrain came along the hall. She was looking very nearly her usual self this afternoon, her blue-white hair freshly dressed, her frock of pale blue crisp and attractive. "I think we're going to have to have a conference."

Olivia stopped, glancing at me but not so pointedly that I was intimidated into moving on. After all, he'd brought up the subject in my presence, and I felt I had a certain interest in what was going on. If David

didn't want me to hear it, it would be a simple matter to make his conference private.

"What is it, David?"

"It's Silvy, Olivia. We're going to have to do something different . . . get someone besides Emma to look after her. Emma doesn't seem to be able to keep up with her any more . . . maybe no one person could. Silvy's getting away from her too often, and God only knows what she's doing when she's out of Emma's sight."

So he thought it was Silvy who had tried to pull me down into the depths of the pool? I remembered that hand on my ankle, and I wondered if Silvy would have been that strong. Granted, she wasn't a feeble old lady in spite of her years, but was she stronger than I was?

Olivia's face was wooden. "What do you suggest? You know how she gets if we try to lock her in . . ."

"No, we can't keep her locked up in a couple of rooms," David agreed. "But I'm wondering if the time hasn't come to think seriously about a custodial home, Olivia . . ."

Olivia's face splintered in shocked alarm. "No! I told you, David, I'll never consent to that, not to an institution! She's my sister, and we've kept her here at Montrain all these years. If Emma can't cope we'll get someone else, but I won't put Silvy into a madhouse."

"Olivia . . ." He put a restraining hand on her arm. "I'm not talking about a madhouse. I'm talking about a place where Silvy will be protected . . ."

"She can be protected here." Was it a plea, unspoken but eloquent, that I saw in Olivia Montrain's eyes? She didn't look at me, yet I knew she wished me else-

where; stubbornly, I stayed where I was. It was my life in jeopardy, wasn't it? And unless something was done about Silvy . . . if she were the one responsible . . . I had no intention of staying here.

"No." David's voice was quiet but decisive. "I'm afraid it's gone past that stage, Olivia. There have been several incidents since Sandi's been here . . . they can't be allowed to continue."

She shot a startled glance at me, and for some inexplicable reason there was animosity in it . . . animosity toward me, as if I were the guilty party. "Oh? What's happened?"

He told her. About the attack on Toni, the hammer washed in my bathroom, hidden, and then removed from its hiding place, and finally about the attempt to drown me in the pool.

If she knew any of this ahead of time, she covered it well. I was somewhat horrified at my own trend of thought. Could I seriously believe that this beautiful, dignified, self-possessed woman would countenance such acts in her home?

My own lips tightened. Yes, I thought, if the stakes were high enough Olivia Montrain would do whatever necessary to maintain her status quo; it might be ice water running through her blue veins, but she was a woman used to having her own way and capable of doing whatever it took to accomplish this.

Immediately, I was shocked. How could I make such a judgment about a woman I scarcely knew? Any woman would fight for her home, her family. Wasn't it commendable that Olivia fought against anything that would make her sister unhappy?

Yet that didn't quite fit, either. She refused to put

Silvy into an institution, but she didn't have her at the table, didn't normally associate with her. Silvy had a keeper, who was supposed to see that she didn't annoy the rest of the family.

Unbidden, the thought was there in my mind, fully formed.

Was Silvy kept here, not for her own benefit, but because the Montrains themselves benefited in some way by having her here?

Olivia had considered what David said. Finally she nodded, ever so slightly.

"All right. We'll get someone in addition to Emma. I'll see to it."

A little of the tension went out of David's body. "Good. And until she actually gets here to take over, you'd better warn Emma and the girls. She can't be allowed to make any more trouble."

I should, I suppose, have felt relieved to know that poor Silvy was gaining another keeper, but I didn't. I was not all that sure that it had been Silvy who was responsible for the things that had happened. I could picture her, wig askew, lower lip caught between her teeth, waiting for Toni and then swinging that hammer. I could imagine her slashing at my clothes, perhaps laughing as she did it.

But I couldn't for the life of me be certain that it was Silvy who had donned that skin diving mask and tank and sought to hold me underwater until I ran out of air.

Yet who else? There were so few, so pitiably few others, who could have done it. The twins didn't like me, that was obvious, probably because they regarded me as possible competition with David. But that had

nothing to do with Toni, and even if they hated me it was scarcely reason enough for the act that had been staged last night. You simply don't kill off romantic rivals, not even when you're sure they *are* rivals.

Olivia? She was cold blooded, all right, but she had no reason to wish me ill. It takes a powerful motive to plot to kill someone.

Unless you're insane.

And so we were back to Silvy. Full circle, and no conclusions reached.

Olivia walked away from us, to the small study under the stairs which was decorated in her favorite blues and white; I heard her dialing the telephone.

David smiled at me in an attempt to be reassuring. "Don't worry, we'll see that Emma has enough help to make it impossible for Silvy to go off on any more rampages."

"You think it was Silvy, then? But why? She seemed to like me."

We began to walk toward the back of the house and that inviting rectangle of sun spangled gardens and sparkling water. David sighed. "God only knows what motivates Silvy. I've given up trying to figure it out. A good share of the time she's as rational as anyone else, and then she does something quite unexpected."

"Has she . . ." I swallowed and forced the words out, uncomfortable as they were. "Has she done things like this before? Attacking people?"

Was there a perceptible hesitation? If so, it was brief.

"Well, no, not exactly. Nothing like the way Toni was struck down, nothing like what happened to you in the pool."

"But that took planning, didn't it? Preparing a note, slipping it under my door, waiting until I'd gone to get back the note and take the diary, putting on that skin diving outfit and getting into the pool almost without making a sound. Is she capable of planning something all out that way?"

"Oh, she's clever enough, Silvy is. Too clever for her own good, actually. You heard how she tricked Emma into letting herself be locked in the bathroom, that sort of thing. I'd feel better if we simply put her into a good rest home where qualified attendants would see that she couldn't possibly do any harm, but Olivia feels so strongly about it . . ."

He pushed open the French doors and we stepped out into the warmth of the back gardens. I avoided looking at the pool, watching David's face.

"You don't worry about the children? Vanessa and Willie?"

"The kids? What about them?"

"Well, if Silvy is doing such . . . irresponsible things, might they not get in the way?"

"Silvy likes the kids, and they like her. I wouldn't anticipate any trouble there," he said, but I'd put a doubt into his mind; I could see it working like yeast in warm dough.

"She seemed to like me, too," I reminded him. The sun was warm on my bare arms, but it couldn't completely drive away the chill I felt. "It would be terrible if anything happened . . ."

I didn't want to finish that sentence, so I let it trail off. He had turned to face me, looking down into my eyes.

"You're genuinely concerned about the kids, aren't you?"

"Yes, certainly."

Unexpectedly, he put his hands on my shoulders, smiling. "You're a thoroughly nice person, Sandi Dalling, do you know that? One of the nicest people I've met in a long time."

I flushed a little, laughing. "What, because I don't want anything to happen to Willie and Vanessa?"

"That, and other things." For a moment he stared into my face, and then, lightly, brushed his lips across mine. "My luck hasn't been all good for a while now, but I think it took a turn for the better when I drew you out of the employment pool. Look, I'll certainly make an extra effort to keep an eye on the kids until we get another attendant here for Silvy, but don't worry about it. I'm sure Silvy won't harm them."

As it happened, it wasn't the children who were attacked next, nor me, but it was as frightening as if I myself had been the target, for it was I who found the next victim.

15

She came that afternoon, from the agency Olivia had called. Her name was Irene Minty, a woman of about forty, thin, wiry, athletic. Her blonde hair was worn in a coronet of braids and her face and arms were a mass of freckles. A grim looking woman, was my first thought. Poor Silvy.

Silvy didn't take to her, and although she was quieter about it, neither did Emma. Of course I suppose Emma felt that her own position was threatened, that Irene Minty might replace her.

Olivia took her upstairs to Silvy's room. We could hear them from the lower floor, although it would be more accurate to say we could hear Silvy. Her screamed vituperation was directed at all of them: Olivia, Emma, the newcomer. I couldn't make out all the words, but her meaning was clear enough.

Willie stared, wide-eyed, up the stairway. "What's the matter with Aunt Silvy?"

"She's furious," Vanessa told him, "about that new nurse Gram got for her. I don't blame her, I didn't like the woman's looks myself."

If David had been there I wouldn't have said anything; as it was, my being the only adult with them, I felt compelled to say, "It isn't fair to judge her on her looks, you know. People can't help how they look."

Vanessa eyed me shrewdly. "Oh, yes, they can. It isn't that she's sort of homely that makes her unpleasant looking. It's the way her eyes are all cold and her mouth is so tight. Your mouth isn't like that . . . it's sort of . . . soft and looks as if it smiles a lot."

"Does it?" I laughed then, and led the kids away from the area where we could hear the rampage upstairs. David and the twins were planning another archery match, and when he asked if I'd like to go along, I was glad to escape from the house. I felt guilty, as if it were my fault that Silvy was saddled with a stricter jailer, which I suppose it was. Absurd to feel sorry for Silvy; if she were responsible for the things that had been happening, it was only sensible to get a keeper who could control her.

If she were responsible.

I went along with the others out to the archery range, trying to pretend I didn't realize Iona and Iola resented my presence. They made me sufficiently uncomfortable so that I was on the verge of walking back to the house alone when we heard shouts from the bank behind us. I turned to see them coming toward us, half a dozen of them, men and girls in bright summer clothes.

Iola said, "Damnation," under her breath, but Iona

waved at them enthusiastically, and they swarmed over the hill.

The beautiful people, obviously. Extraordinarily good looking, tanned, well dressed. It didn't tax my powers of deduction to figure out that they were all connected in some way with Renault films.

David greeted them courteously enough, but I sensed they were not friends of his. Iona, however, made up for his reserve by kissing them all, or allowing herself to be kissed. One particularly handsome blond youth made what I considered a bit of a fuss over her; it was only when I noticed her eyes sliding surreptitiously toward David that I realized she was putting on part of her reaction for his benefit. To make him jealous, perhaps?

If he noticed, he certainly let nothing show in his face. "Were in the middle of a match," he said to the group in general. "If you care to join us, there's equipment at the house. Or the pool might be more tempting."

After much noisy consultation they decided to shoot first and then swim. I didn't especially care for any of them . . . was that only envy on my part? and I was about to word a withdrawal which would probably have been ignored when David made a point of smiling directly at me.

"Iona's going back to the house, I guess, to outfit her guests. Why don't you fill in for her, Sandi? I think with ten minutes practice you'll be able to compete with these jokers." It was said lightly, with no open contempt at any rate, and they took it good naturedly. One man with an unusual dark face . . . he reminded me of the fellow who used to play Mr. Spock

on television . . . favored me with a look indicating he was interested.

"I'll be glad to shoot partners with Sandi," he offered, and although Iona had not been paying any attention to him I saw her face tighten angrily. David was not for me, and neither was anyone else, apparently.

"I've already claimed Sandi," David said, offering me Vanessa's bow. "Come on, let's get moving or we'll never get around the course in time for a swim before the sun goes down."

My shooting was strictly amateurish compared to David's and Iola's, but we moved on from target to target. Once when I missed the bale completely he said, "We'll have to get you a decent bow; that one's too light for you. We've got one of Gayle's tucked away somewhere, about thirty pounds pull. I think you could handle that. Do you know where it is, Iola?"

For an instant, and only I could see her face, there was shock in her blue eyes. "Gayle's bow?" she echoed. "You aren't going to lend her Gayle's bow?"

"If she likes it and can handle one that heavy I'm going to give it to her." He was sublimely unaware of her reaction. He selected another arrow, fitted it to his bow, and a moment later it was quivering in the center of the target. "There's no point in putting it away and not using it," he continued as we moved forward to retrieve our arrows.

Iola made no further comment, but I knew she was upset. It gave me a peculiar feeling, too, to be offered something of his dead wife's.

With Iola fallen silent now that David had made a point of coaching me, I began to enjoy what I was do

ing. That lasted until the others returned some twenty minutes later, equipped with an assortment of bows and odd arrows.

I finished out the round, glad that it didn't last long; there was no place in this group of wealthy, spoiled young people for a simple little typist-secretary. I think David, too, found them wearing; it was he who vetoed another pass around the range when we finally reached the last target.

"Go ahead if you like, but I'm for a cold drink and a swim. How about you, Sandi?"

The last thing I wanted was a swim . . . the memory of that darkened pool could still inspire a chill along my spine . . . but I wanted even less to stay here with Iona's friends.

"Sounds very nice," I murmured, and we moved off ahead of the others who had also decided to swim.

I put it down to my own recent terrifying experience, but I was apprehensive and uneasy. Premonition? or only a normal reaction to the events of the past few days? At any rate, I did not join in the laughter. Perhaps something within me knew that within a matter of hours Montrain would be the scene of violent, brutal death, and that it would in some way relate to me.

I wasn't sure I could bring myself to swim in that pool, even in the daylight with a dozen other people present. Perhaps David sensed what I was feeling, for as we entered the house he reached for my hand and gave it a brief squeeze, although he said nothing except that he was going to put away the archery equipment.

I didn't wait for him but went on toward the stairs.

Vanessa and Willie were ahead of me, running and shoving one another, earning their grandmother's stern admonition as they passed the doorway of her little study.

They were careless, and I saw Vanessa jostle the arm of the new employee, Irene Minty, as they met at the head of the stairs. Miss Minty's freckled countenance registered irritation, but she kept her voice level.

"Are you allowed to run in the house this way?"

"Why not? We live here," Willie informed her.

Vanessa had the grace to apologize, however. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you. Come on, Willie, let's go," and they were away down the hall, running and making quite an unnecessary amount of noise.

Silvy and Emma were with Miss Minty, or directly behind her. Silvy wore a dark wig which from the back might have made her indistinguishable from Iona, and a yellow slack suit which cruelly displayed her neck and arms with their sagging, withered flesh. It was apparent that she was in a temper, and she wasn't long in letting me know what it was all about.

"Where's my sister?" she demanded angrily, her face mottled and discolored.

"In her study." I made a slight motion with one hand.

"We'll just see about this," Silvy said, her voice grim. "They've gone and hired this female impersonator to take Emma's place, and she hasn't got the manners of a hog; I won't stand for it."

Irene Minty flushed behind her freckles, and Emma tugged ineffectually at Silvy's arm.

"That's not so, Miss Silvy. I'm not going away, I'm not being replaced."

"Then why is she here, that cold stick of a woman? I won't have her in my rooms, I won't have her touching me. I don't like her, do you understand?"

Emma cast me an appealing glance. "Miss Dalling, you heard what they said, didn't you? That I couldn't be with Miss Silvy all the time, so they must get someone else for part of the time? I'm sure you'll like Miss Minty when you get to know her, dear."

"Not bloody likely," Silvy spat. "I'm going to talk to Olivia . . ."

I knew it was a mistake when Irene Minty put a wiry hand on Silvy's wrist.

"Your sister doesn't want to be bothered, Miss Silvy, so we're going back to your rooms."

Silvy's answer was unprintable, her reaction violent. She threw off the restraining hand and very nearly shoved Miss Minty off balance at the head of the stairs. For a few seconds they struggled there, both of them breathing quickly, while Emma tried to haul off her charge.

"Maybe it would be better," I suggested, "to let her talk to her sister, or to David, if she wants to discuss the matter." Anything seemed better to me than a physical tussle in which someone might get hurt.

I think Silvy would have responded to my reasonable tone; at least she stopped struggling for a moment. But when she did Irene Minty made another mistake. She was coldly contemptuous of the woman she had been hired to attend, and as one might do with an hysterical patient, she raised one hand and slapped Silvy directly across the mouth.

For a matter of seconds the four of us were a study in suspended animation. Then Emma drew back in shock, and Silvy herself reeled physically but rallied at once.

This time it was Silvy who was in complete control of herself and her voice. The red had faded from her face, leaving it so white that by comparison her eyes flashed a vivid blue. I wondered if at some time Silvy had been an actress herself, for she had all the regal bearing of a queen when she spoke.

"If you ever lay a hand on me again," she addressed Miss Minty, "I will kill you."

Miss Minty made another ill advised movement toward her new charge, but Emma insinuated herself between them. "No, look, let me get her back to her room. She'll come with me, won't you, Miss Silvy?"

"Don't be an ass," Silvy told her. "I'm going to talk to someone about this, because I don't intend to stand for it. I may be forgetful at times, and maybe I'm even a little cracked, but I also help support this menage and nobody's going to tell me I have to have a frozen faced, muscle bound . . ."

"Miss Silvy, calling names won't help," Emma cut in.

"Maybe not, but talking to Olivia and David will. I may have to accept a companion, Emma, but I don't have to accept any jailer. Get out of my way."

"You aren't going downstairs to annoy your sister," Miss Minty said in a firm voice, and I wished fervently that she had sense enough to keep still. It was possible to reason with Silvy most of the time, but the way Irene Minty wanted to handle her would only make her worse.

"If I go down and ask David and Mrs. Montrain to come up to your room, would you wait for them there?" I asked quickly.

Silvy's blue eyes were shrewd. "Are you just saying that to get me back there to lock me in? Or will you really bring them?"

"I'll bring them, I promise. One of them, anyway; I'm sure Dr. Campton will come."

"All right. On the condition," Silvy stipulated, "that you keep that ogress somewhere else. She's not to come into my suite at all."

"I was hired . . ." Irene Minty began, but this time it was I who interrupted.

"Please, Miss Minty. I'm sure this can be taken care of if everyone will calm down. Emma can go back to her room with Silvy, can't you, Emma?"

"Certainly, Miss," Emma agreed. "Come along, Miss Silvy, and before they get here you can finish dressing . . ."

"Finish . . . ?" Silvy looked down at her yellow slack suit, oblivious of the crepey upper arms and the unbecoming cut of the rather low necked tunic. "What's the matter with the way I'm dressed?"

Aware that she had made a misstep, Emma was unsure of how to get out of it. "Well, I mean, you always wear jewelry when you're fully dressed, when you go out where people can see you. I thought you'd want to put on a necklace or something, that top sort of calls for something . . ."

"If I had any jewelry," Silvy said, "I would indeed put it on. However, don't expect me to wear that trash on my dresser. It's not my jewelry, you know; you can throw it all in the garbage, for all I care."

Miss Minty gave me a look as if to say, "There, you can see she's not sane, and we don't have to treat her as if she were." I ignored Miss Minty.

"Will you wait in your room, then, while I call Dr. Campton?"

Silvy didn't deign to answer that, but turned away and swept down the corridor as if she were wearing a tiara and a priceless train. I couldn't help admiring her.

Irene Minty was regarding me in a glacial fashion. "I'm not sure I understand, Miss Dalling, just what your position is in this house."

It was said in a manner suggesting that I had no right to interfere with her job, which was probably true. Not being Silvy, I couldn't come right out and tell her that I thought she'd get further with a bit of tact than she would with her sledge hammer tactics. Before I could think of something reasonably polite, she spoke again.

"I was hired for one purpose, Miss Dalling: to keep Mrs. Montrain from annoying the rest of the family. I have had a good bit of experience with patients of this type, and I assure you I can handle her."

"I don't question that. But it seems to me it would be easier on Silvy if she understood the necessity for you being here. If she can be brought to accept you rather than fight you it should be a lot easier on everybody."

"I am not concerned with being easier on everybody," she said, "and I would appreciate it if you would mind your own business."

Well, that was blunt; I didn't have much justification for interfering, so she left me with little to say.

Neither of us had heard David on the carpeted stairs; I jumped when he put a hand on my shoulder.

"What's the trouble, Sandi?"

Somehow, by touching me and speaking my name that way, he put himself on my side. I knew it, and she knew it. I could tell as the anger congealed on her freckled face, masking her feelings as much as she was able.

"A problem with Silvy," I told him, my heartbeat quickening at the continued weight of his hand against my skin. "She resents a new attendant . . . I talked her into waiting in her room for you or Mrs. Montrain to talk to her. She says she won't have Miss Minty."

"Well, I'll talk to her. Sometimes I can talk her around. Go ahead and get ready to swim, Sandi. I won't be long."

"Will you require my presence, Doctor?" Miss Minty spoke in a reserved, professional manner.

"No, I don't think so. If Silvy's dead set against you it may take some doing to bring her around. Why don't you relax for an hour or so, and I'll see what I can do?"

She nodded without replying, and moved off down the stairs. I went on to my room and a few minutes later, when I'd put on my swimming suit and looked down at the pool, I saw her, striding off toward the hedge beyond. She walked quickly, not looking back, and none of the people gathering around the water paid any attention to her.

I was about to leave my room when the door suddenly opened, and Silvy popped inside. She carried

a brown paper bag, which she thrust into my hands.

"Here," she said. "Take these."

I recognized the sack before I peered into it. Half a million dollars worth of precious stones twinkled up at me. I opened my mouth to protest, but she was closing the door behind her and when she turned again to me her smile was grim.

"There's nobody else in this house I can trust. Not even poor Emma . . . they've brainwashed the poor thing into believing anything they say. Listen, you can get in and out of here any time you like, can't you?"

"Why, yes, certainly, but . . ."

"All right. You think I'm crazy, too, and maybe I am, a little. But I know diamonds when I see them, and these aren't. They're junk, they're some of that paste stuff Iona makes for the movies. I've had my jewels for years!" she exclaimed, reading heaven knows what on my face. "Do you think I can't tell the difference between my own things and this trash? Oh, they're pretty good copies, I suppose on the screen nobody would know the difference. But I know it. They've stolen my jewels and palmed off these cheap substitutes on me!"

I stared at her, not knowing what to say.

"All I want you to do is take them to a jeweler. Anyone you like, although Aaron Friedman made up some of these things . . . I mean the genuine ones . . . and he'd know in a minute. But any other jeweler will know, too. That they aren't real, I mean. Please, Sandi, there's no one else I can ask. I might have asked Toni, but she's still in the hospital. All you

have to do is take them to a jeweler and ask him what they're worth. If he says over a couple of thousand I'll eat them with sugar over my Wheaties. Will you do it?"

I stared down into the bag. They looked like diamonds to me. And emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and pearls. Yet what did I know? The ones I'd seen on the screen had looked genuine, too, yet almost certainly were not.

What could it hurt to take them? If nothing else, I could turn them over to David. I didn't want the responsibility of handling half a million dollars worth of someone else's valuables.

"All right," I agreed. "I'll take them."

Her smile was gleeful, transforming the old face. "I knew you could be counted on! Oh, and on the bottom of the sack is that diary of Gayle's. Maybe you can see that it gets back where it belongs."

No wonder the sack was so heavy. "Did you take the diary out of my room, Silvy?"

Her smile faded. "No. What do you think I am, a thief? I found it. In the linen closet. Right in plain sight, it wasn't hidden. Somebody read it and found it worthless, I guess. Nothing in it that I could see, either. All that jabber about her children and David and her marvelous movie job. Listen, you make an excuse to get off the grounds with these and take them to a jeweler. Then maybe you'll believe me. Then you'll help me."

"What sort of help do you want from me, Silvy?" I asked quietly.

"Out of here. I think it's time I went away. There's

something bad going on in this house. I don't know what it is, but I don't feel safe here any more. But I'm not leaving without my jewels."

Outside in the hall I heard Emma's frightened voice. "Miss Silvy? Where are you, Miss Silvy?"

I reached for the doorknob and turned it. Emma appeared on the verge of fainting in her relief.

"Oh, Miss Silvy, you shouldn't have done it! Don't you understand, if you keep pulling tricks like locking me in closets they'll have to have someone else to take care of you? They'll feel I can't be trusted!"

"They'd better not get that female monkey to do it. Don't get excited, I'll go back with you. I just had to talk to Sandi for a minute." She gave me a conspiratorial wink, and adjusted her dark wig at a rakish angle which made me feel slightly drunk. She must change those wigs every twenty minutes, I thought thickly.

They were gone, leaving me with an ordinary brown paper bag filled with either a fortune in jewels or a fabulous collection of fakes. Which?

I stared at them wondering what in heaven's name to do with them. Turn them over to David and let him deal with them?

Or was there a chance that Silvy knew what she was talking about? What if it were true? What if someone had substituted paste for precious stones? If so, shouldn't the truth come out?

The package was too bulky to be cleverly hidden, I decided. It wouldn't fit in my handbag, or in any of the usual cute places. I stuffed it inside my pillowcase, where the jewels were sure to be found if anyone sus-

pected that I had them, and locked my room before leaving it.

Silvy was right about one thing. There was something bad going on in this house, but the precautions being taken were all with the idea in mind that Silvy was the one responsible. I dropped the key into the case I carried for my sunglasses, and made my way downstairs.

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David seemed to understand my feeling about going into the water. The pool was a completely different place now than it had been last night. The sun warmed tiles were a pale blue under our feet, and with a crowd of laughing, splashing swimmers around the pool there should have been nothing frightening about it.

Yet I could not bring myself to swim. Would it be possible, with all those people milling around, for someone to attempt once more to hold me under water until my oxygen gave out?

I sat on the bench beside the picnic table, rubbing suntan oil on my legs. David came over to sit beside me, offering to do the more difficult areas on my back and shoulders.

"I think I'll just soak up the sun," I said, relinquishing the bottle. I knew I wasn't fooling him. I was afraid he'd insist that the best thing for me to do was to jump right back into the water, the way they

tell you to do after having been thrown by a horse, but he didn't.

Somewhere between my room and the pool I made a decision. I wouldn't turn the jewels over to David or anyone else. No one knew I had them. There was no reason to think there was any chance of them being stolen. (Besides, a small voice whispered, if they're substitutes at least one person knows they aren't worth stealing.) It could do no harm to do as Silvy asked: take them to an expert and determine the truth.

So I made no mention of Silvy's visit to my room. We talked a little, David brought me a glass of something cold . . . I was in such a numbed state I couldn't remember later what it was . . . while all the beautiful people cavorted around us.

It was only when I came down to dinner, dressed in a simple white sheath with a red belt and red sandals, that I began to relax somewhat, to think that I might be able to bring things under control. I was being an idiot about the pool; did I intend to live the rest of my life in Southern California being afraid of a swimming pool? The next time David asked me to swim I would do it, before I worked up to a full-fledged phobia about it.

Vanessa and Willie were being fed in the kitchen, I learned, because Iona's guests were staying to dinner. I saw Iola and one of the guests, the intriguing dark haired one, in intimate conversation in one corner of the spacious living room; she had been won over, momentarily at any rate, by his charms. Iona was busy making drinks for the others; the martinis flowed liberally, the sound was increasing, and no one was aware of me at all.

"Is everyone down?" Olivia asked when I entered the kitchen to see if she needed any help with the children. (Or was it only that I couldn't face entering the room to join all the beautiful people?)

"I don't think Dr. Campton has come down yet. I suppose Miss Minty will be eating upstairs?"

Olivia made a face. "Silvy refuses to allow her in her suite. I don't want to have a big ruckus while we have guests in the house, so I suppose it would be better for her to eat downstairs."

Vanessa raised her eyes from the salad she was building to look like a rabbit's head, absent-mindedly nibbling on a carrot strip intended for an ear. "I'll bet Aunt Iola won't like it if you put her in the dining room. She's not one of the scintillating sort, is she? Aunt Iola only likes scintillating people," she said in an aside to me.

Which undoubtedly left me out, too.

Olivia's frown deepened. "You're right about that. Well, maybe we'd better ask her to eat out here with you youngsters."

"Oh, Gram!" Vanessa protested, but I put in, "Maybe I could join her here with the children. I don't want to spoil Iona's party."

"You wouldn't mind?" She seemed relieved, for I, too, was an awkward addition to the group; like Irene Minty, I didn't fit in. "That might make it easier. Vanessa, run upstairs and tell Miss Minty, will you? It's time you were served here, and then I'll take care of the dining room."

I finished the salads, including the ones intended for the dining room which were elaborate but not bunny heads. Olivia was an expert in the kitchen, and

her food superb, but I wondered why she didn't get some help. She surely didn't intend to continue to run this enormous house alone, with Toni in the hospital. Even with the two of them, and Emma seeing to Silvy's suite, it must have been a burden to her.

Vanessa was back within a few minutes, breathless from running. "She's not in her room, Gram, nor in Aunt Silvy's, either."

"I told her we'd be eating at seven . . . you'd think she'd have the courtesy to appear without having to be run after. Where on earth could she have gone?"

I remembered, then. "I saw her walking out several hours ago. Perhaps she's lost track of the time, and she's enjoying the grounds . . ." It was hard to imagine Miss Minty enjoying anything, from what I'd seen of her, but one never knows.

Olivia made a moue of exasperation. "Well, it's inconsiderate of her, to say the least. I suppose if she gets hungry she'll come around, but she was, after all, hired to take care of my sister, not to wander around for hours. She could come back inside long enough to find whether or not she's needed."

"Maybe she got disgusted and left," Vanessa suggested.

"That's not likely. You'd better go out and look for her," Olivia said.

"Oh, Gram! It's hot out there, and I just washed all the sweat off! Let Willie go!"

"I don't know where she is," Willie said, aggrieved. "Why should I have to go?"

"I wouldn't mind going," I said, not quite truthfully. "I saw which direction she took, although that was a

long time ago. Go ahead and eat, if you're ready; it won't matter if we dish up for ourselves out here, will it?"

"No, I suppose not. All right, why don't you do that?" she said, in the most agreeable tone she'd yet used for my benefit.

Afterward I was to wonder if she could have sent me off so calmly had she known what I would find.

I skirted the swimming pool, not looking at it. It was not yet dusk, but the heat had gone out of the summer sun enough so that it was pleasant to walk over the lawns and through the hedge onto the gently rolling hills. Where would she have gone on a walk? Along the path that followed the course of the archery range? To the grove of trees beyond? But it had been hot when she left the house . . . would she have walked all that way across open country?

She had been angry, of course; often people walk off their anger, without thought of where they are going. There were signs, in the grass beyond the hedge, of many feet, but it was impossible to determine whether or not Irene Minty had walked there.

I called out for her, somewhat uncertainly, but there was no reply, so I walked on.

A scrap of white fluttered off to my left, so I veered that way. She might have dropped something, although she wasn't there now . . .

I was wrong. She was there, her body nearly hidden because she had dropped into a shallow depression. My first thought was that she'd tripped and broken an ankle or some such thing, and I called again.

"Miss Minty! Miss Minty, are you all . . ."

The words died as I reached her, for I knew that she

could not answer. This time the phantom of Montrain had not missed her victim.

Irene Minty was dead. The shaft of an arrow protruded from her back, the white of her shirt around it stained a deep red. The feathers were orange and black . . . David's colors, my mind registered in the part of it beyond shock.

She was dead, wasn't she? No one could have taken an arrow like that and lived . . . but I must know for sure, know whether to call an ambulance as we had done for Toni, or . . .

She had fallen forward, her body tilting to the right as if the impact of the arrow had caused her to swing around. I dropped to my knees in the dry grass and then I could see it, blood congealing on its tip. It was a hunting arrow, a broadhead, one of those vicious razor edged blades, and it had passed entirely through her body.

I had never seen a dead person before except my grandmother, years ago. Hers had been a gentle death, coming in sleep. There was nothing gentle about this.

I was glad I couldn't see her face. I didn't want to know what the expression had been that twisted her features at the moment of death.

Shaking uncontrollably, I got to my feet and scrambled up the shallow bank, nearly falling in my haste. Dear God, I had believed David when he said nothing more would happen, that they would get another keeper for Silvy . . .

Silvy didn't want another keeper. She had slipped away from Emma by some subterfuge only minutes after David had talked to her. She had said she wouldn't tolerate this woman around her . . . and

now Irene Minty was dead, an arrow through her chest.

Now they would have to take her away. The police hadn't been called in after Toni's "fall," but there would be no getting around calling them this time.

I burst into the kitchen, scarcely noticing that the children were eating and that David and Olivia seemed to be having words. I was so relieved to have reached him without encountering one of those wickedly bladed arrows myself that I stretched out my hands to him instinctively, out of breath and unable to speak immediately.

"What's all this about you eating in the kitchen?" he demanded, frowning. "There's no need for that, I want you . . ."

At that point he finally took in my appearance, the expression of horror that must have been on my face.

"Sandi, what's happened? You aren't hurt . . . ?"

"It's Miss Minty," I gasped, glad of the hands that took mine, that communicated warmth and life instead of death. "She's dead . . . she's dead, she's been shot . . . there's an arrow all the way through her . . ."

After that things are blurred in my mind, although I retain a kaleidoscopic impression of shocked faces, excited voices, people milling around, someone crying (that turned out to be one of the girls from the movie studio) and of being eased into a chair.

There was a concerted movement toward the door, halted by David's sharp voice.

"No! Stay here, all of you, inside the house! That's an order! Olivia, call the police and tell them there's

been a death, they'll take it from there. Get Eli down at the gate to admit them. Sandi, can you go with me, show me where she is?"

I did not feel that I could, but I tried to rise. Olivia was staring at him with shock written in every line of her body.

"The police! But it must have been an accident, we don't want the police overrunning the place . . ."

"Olivia, for God's sake, we have no choice! If the woman is dead it's a case for the police, no matter how she died! And after you call them, get everyone together in the living room and stay there until they arrive. Including Silvy and Emma."

"Silvy . . ." Olivia reeled away from him, colliding with two young men behind her. "Oh, lord, you don't think . . ."

"I don't think anything. Just get the police and keep everyone together. Come on, Sandi."

His hand was hard on my arm, steering me through the mass of white, horrified, but excited faces. One eager male voice said, "Let me come with you, maybe I can help . . ."

"I don't need any help, except Sandi to show me where she is," David said in a crisp voice that brooked no argument, and we were past them, out the door, walking around the end of the swimming pool. Strange, the pool no longer bothered me, I thought.

We didn't talk. My legs steadied somewhat but they were weak from the strain of rapid walking when we reached the crumpled figure in the field. David didn't touch her except to test the temperature of her bare arm with one hand.

"No loss of body heat yet, but there wouldn't be much, lying here in the direct sun this way. It may make it hard to tell exactly when she died."

His mutter was to himself, not to me. I stood, absently rubbing my arms as if they were cold, not wanting to look at Miss Minty, unable to look away.

Had she a family? Someone who would grieve that she had come to such a terrible end? And what were we in for, the inhabitants of Montrain? For death alone was bad enough, but this death was at the hand of some unknown person, and the police would insist on knowing who that person was, and why Irene Minty had died.

17

They came very quickly. We did not go back to the house but waited for them there in the open field, not talking, not looking at poor Miss Minty after David's cursory examination.

There was no siren, as I expected, and the men who came toward us from the screen of the hedge were not in uniform. One of them wore a seersucker jacket with his slacks, and a tie; the other was dressed much as David was, in slacks and an open necked shirt.

A faint breeze stirred the hair on Irene Minty's head, a blonde tendril that had escaped her braids, and I felt my own scalp prickle as we waited silently for the men to reach us.

It seemed that David knew them both, for there were no introductions. One of them, the tall one in the seersucker jacket, nodded briefly. "Doctor. The woman's dead?"

"Not much doubt of that," David said. "I'd say the

arrow penetrated the heart, probably also a lung. There's blood on the ground beneath her mouth."

I was glad I hadn't noticed that.

"You haven't touched, or moved the body?"

"No. Only to determine that she wasn't breathing, that she's still warm."

The men squatted beside the remains of Irene Minty, examining her without touching her. Finally they stood up; one of them sighed.

"Well, you stay here with her, Barry. I'll send the lab men out when they get here. Is it possible to drive a car out here, Doctor? The lab van . . . it would make it easier."

David told him how to get around the garage and the hedge. It was the dressed up one who accompanied us back to the house, his partner standing forlorn guard duty.

"This is the young lady who discovered the body?" His eyes were gray, sharp, discerning.

"Yes. Sandi, Sandi Dalling. This is Lieutenant Jamison. I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce you . . . the man back there is Sergeant Barry Crowell of the County Sheriff's Department. Sandi is filling in for a month while my regular girl is on vacation."

"How did you happen to find Miss Minty?" he inquired, leaning forward to look at me around David's tall form.

I told him, reading nothing in his noncommittal grunt. "Would you join the others in the living room, please? I'll be there very shortly. Dr. Campton, I think you might be of some assistance to the medical examiner, if you'd come along with me."

I felt somewhat as if I'd been tossed into a den of

wolves. All eyes were on me, avid, greedy; the voices rose around me in a hubbub of questions.

"I'm sorry, I'm under orders not to discuss anything," I said, taking a vacant chair set slightly apart from any of the others.

"Look, they aren't going to keep us here for long, are they?" A petite blonde in a flame colored sunsuit frowned, leaning toward me, twirling sunglasses in her fingers. "I've got a date tonight. We'll be able to get back to the city by nine, won't we?"

"Why should they keep us? We didn't have anything to do with it. *I* never even saw the woman."

"Depends if they think she was murdered or what . . . if it's murder they sure aren't going to let us go until they've given everybody the third degree."

Their talk swirled around me; I only shook my head when a direct question came my way.

Murder? Well, it couldn't have been suicide, and for the life of me I couldn't see how anyone could have accidentally shot her . . . right out in the open, the way she was.

Murder. Why should the sound of the word on a stranger's lips be so shocking? Toni had been brutally attacked and might not live; then her death would also be considered murder. And my own chilling experience in the swimming pool . . . it might have been passed off as an accident, had I died, but that, too, would have been murder.

It seemed a long time before the police officers came back into the room. There was a veritable roar of protest from Iona's visitors . . . they all had urgent and valid reasons why they couldn't stay any longer, and their rights were being infringed upon. They had all

forgotten about eating the meal Olivia had prepared; personally I was feeling sick and hollow and wished I dared to suggest being allowed to slip out to the kitchen to eat.

Lieutenant Jamison and Sergeant Crowell went through the formality of asking all our names, addresses, occupations, and the reasons for our being present at Montrain. A young uniformed officer took everything down in rapid shorthand.

As I had thought, all the guests were connected with Renault Studios; two of the girls and one of the men were bit players, although they didn't put it that way. The others were in positions similar to Iola's. They were thrilled to be at the scene of a possible murder, and they wanted to hear all about it (they were out of luck, for the officers were adept at fielding all questions without answering any of them) but they were all nervous about being involved.

The Spocky-looking actor took an elegant stance in front of the fireplace, one elbow resting on the white painted mantelpiece. "There's no reason to suspect any of us, you know. We never even saw the woman, never heard of her."

Sergeant Crowell's eyes swept over the assembled company, coming to rest on me. Although I had no guilty knowledge of Miss Minty's death, he made me feel as if I had something to hide.

"How about you, Miss Dalling? How long had you known the deceased?"

"I met her today, when she came out from the agency to take a job here," I said. My voice was steady, but my heart had begun to pound.

I was glad when his eyes moved on to Olivia.

"And you, Mrs. Montrain? Did you know Miss Minty previous to today?"

Olivia shook her head. There was no trace of the illness that had affected her such a short time ago. She was beautiful, gracious, in command of the situation, although I noted there was a faint tic in her left eyelid.

"I never saw her until she showed up here today. I had called the agency . . . Swanlund's . . . as I usually do for temporary help. They sent Miss Minty."

"Exactly what position was Miss Minty to fill here?"

My throat tightened, but Olivia didn't hesitate. "She was hired as a companion to my sister, Silvy."

"But your sister already has a companion, has she not?"

"Yes. But Emma has been working too hard; Silvy is forgetful and sometimes childish and we feel better if someone is with her around the clock. Emma can hardly be expected to be on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."

He nodded at the reasonableness of this. I ought to speak out, to tell him about Toni and about the other things that had happened in this house . . . it was impossible to do it here, now, in this room full of hostile strangers.

"Well, I'm sorry to delay you when you have all this pressing business elsewhere . . ." there was a sardonic glaze in Jamison's eyes, "but as this is a murder investigation I'm sure you all realize that we have no choice. Sergeant Crowell and I will speak to each of you, individually. Dr. Campton has kindly offered us the use of his study for this purpose."

There was a chorus of protest.

"Hey, now, look, we just came for the afternoon, we don't know anything about the woman who got killed!"

Jamison held up one hand and waited until the dissent died down. Olivia spoke into the silence.

"Murder? Already . . . surely you can't be sure that it was . . . murder?"

Crowell spoke gently but in such a manner that the entire room was hushed. "Mrs. Montrain, we understand your reluctance to have a murder committed on your property, but the woman was shot in the back with one of those broadheads deer hunters use, with sufficient force to drive it completely through her body. There is no question of her having done it to herself."

"But . . . it could have been an accident." She put out a graceful white hand to a tabletop for support. "There were people shooting . . . all over out there this afternoon. Amateurs, most of them. One of them could have hit her . . . accidentally."

This time the howl was angrily indignant, for which I couldn't blame them.

Lieutenant Jamison cut smoothly through the furor. "It isn't for us to say whether or not it was murder or accident, Mrs. Montrain. That will be decided by the proper authorities after an autopsy has been performed. But at this point it appears to be murder, and we will act on the assumption that it is."

Iola stepped forward, her upturned face particularly lovely in its frame of soft, dark hair. "Lieutenant, it's true, what my mother said. A lot of amateurs were shooting, and it's possible an arrow went astray. Be-

cause of our name this is going to get a lot of newspaper attention, and there's no point in making it worse than it is . . ."

"Miss Montrain, a woman is dead. How much worse can it be?"

"I'm sorry she's dead," Iola said, flushing faintly, "but the rest of us are still living."

"And you know damn well," the tall blond boy put in, "that it wasn't one of us *amateurs* who shot her. Whoever pulled that bow was an expert shot, if you ask me, and that sure lets me out."

"And me!"

"And me!"

The man in charge had had enough of us and our petty complaints. He straightened perceptibly and his voice became crisp. "We will ask you to come into the study one at a time. We'll start with you . . . what's your name . . . Stebbins?"

That turned out to be the blond boy, who went with set jaw and fire in his eye. The rest of us sat or paced restlessly. Iona had withdrawn into a corner chair, speaking to no one, chain smoking. Her mother sat quietly, the only sign of tension that minute twitching of her eyelid.

It was an effort for me to sit without fidgeting. There was no doubt in my own mind that Irene Minty had been murdered, although unless it was an act of insanity I couldn't imagine what the motive had been. And if it had been murder it had most certainly been done by a member of this household. I thought Emma could be ruled out; Emma wasn't the sort of person who had time for athletic workouts, she wouldn't be

an archer or a swimmer. Emma had grown up in a world of hard work, where there was little opportunity for the frills of life.

My eyes worked unobtrusively around the room. Olivia had been an archer, although she said she seldom shot now. Was she still good enough to handle one of those heavy bows? I wasn't sure, but I thought it would have had to be a heavy one, probably one of David's, to handle those large aluminum arrows.

My own guess would be that Miss Minty was shot from the shelter of the hedge; I couldn't believe anyone daring enough to stand out in the open to draw that bow. She had been some distance from the hedge, which meant that the archer had indeed been an expert. David and the twins regularly shot from sixty to eighty yards at their targets, which of course were not ordinarily moving. Was Olivia, or Silvy, capable of that precise placement at such a distance?

David could have done it. So, I thought coldly, could Iona and Iola. As my gaze reached Iola I was struck by her expression. Not fear, nor anger, such as most of the other faces registered. It was speculation, suspicion.

I tried to follow her eyes, to see who she had been looking at, but it was difficult to tell. Iona, Olivia? Or was it the two who had just entered the room? Emma and Silvy?

Emma had obviously been told the appalling news; she was white and nervous, picking at the front of her dress, her eyes avoiding those of everyone else. Silvy came straight toward me, although there were other vacant chairs; she perched, birdlike, on the wide arm of my chair where she was an immediate attraction.

This wig was one I hadn't seen before: a striking, unnatural pinkish blonde, shoulder length, in a style that had once been considered adorable on June Allyson but was grotesque on Silvy. With it she wore a silver lame pantsuit and silver sandals with dainty french heels. She displayed no jewelry except the diamond rings which were presumably the only genuine stones left to her.

Her desiccated face, under the pinkish hair, retained its calm, but the hand resting on her knee trembled.

"Sandi . . . you found her?" Her voice was low, not carrying to anyone more than a few feet from us.

I swallowed. "Yes."

"She's dead? Shot with one of David's arrows?"

How did she know that? That the arrow had been David's?

She read the question in my face.

"They're talking about it . . . the police. Never saw so many policemen. Listen, are they trying to pin this on me?"

Startled, I looked her full in the face. "Why, no, I don't think so."

"They will." She brought her lips together, grimly. "You wait and see. But whatever happens, you're my friend, aren't you, Sandi?"

My reply was weak, but I said the only thing possible. "Of course, Silvy."

"Don't you believe anything they tell you about me. I didn't shoot that woman, although I might have if they'd insisted on keeping her here. Listen, you get those things out to you-know-who first thing, will you?"

"It's Saturday," I reminded her. "There won't be anyone open."

"Take it to Friedman's home. He's in the phone book, lives somewhere in Beverly Hills, I think. You see if what I said isn't true, and then see who you believe. Them or me."

I shifted uneasily, for I could see them all watching us . . . the Montrains, the visitors . . . and I knew they were wondering what she was saying to me.

"I'll do it as soon as I can," I agreed.

Several of the others had been interviewed and were being allowed to leave. When they called my name I was both startled and relieved, for the tension in the living room was mounting and I was afraid of what Silvy might say or do.

I followed the uniformed officer along the corridor to the familiar study. It looked different now, however, with Lieutenant Jamison sitting behind David's desk, the Sergeant perched on the arm of a chair, the young officer with his shorthand book unobtrusively placed where he wouldn't be noticed by the person being questioned.

I took the chair they indicated, surreptitiously wiping the sweat off my palms on my skirt. They had already talked to David, I knew that. I wished to heaven I knew what he had told them.

"Miss Dalling. Please be comfortable. Would you care for a cigarette?"

The Lieutenant extended a gold case, monogrammed.

"No, thank you." My voice was husky and I cleared my throat.

"I understand that you came here with Dr. Campton

on the . . .” he consulted a note pad before him on the desk, “. . . the tenth of the month. That right?”

“Yes.”

“What has your reception been in this house?”

It wasn't a question I had been expecting. “My . . . reception?”

“Yes. Have you had the impression that you were welcome here?”

Well, here it was. It was tell the truth now, or become entangled in a web of evasions and half-truths that could do nothing to sort out the threads of this terrible tangle.

“Not particularly, except by Dr. Campton.”

“Have the Montrains been actively hostile?”

Actively hostile . . . I stifled a small surge of hysterical laughter that almost reached my lips.

“Has Dr. Campton told you that someone tried to . . . to drown me in the pool last night?”

“Did someone try to drown you? I'd like to hear about that, Miss Dalling.”

So I told him. And before we were finished, I'd told him about the hammer and my suspicions that it had been used to fell Toni. I didn't mention Gayle's diary, which had been taken from my purse, nor the slashed dresses, nor Silvy's claim that paste fakes had been substituted for her jewels.

I expected some questions in depth on what I had just said. Instead, Jamison took a slightly different tack.

“You were present when Mrs. Silvy Montrain confronted Miss Minty earlier today?”

“I met them on the landing, yes.”

“Mrs. Montrain indicated that she was not pleased

with her sister's selection of a companion, did she not?"

"Yes." That was one way of putting it. How did they know about what had taken place then? They hadn't interviewed either Silvy or Emma yet, although if Silvy had picked up information from them I supposed they might have done the same in return as she was passing through the halls.

"Do you happen to recall exactly what was said?"

Reluctantly, I related it as precisely as I could remember it. It was all the truth, but I felt guilty, as if I were betraying Silvy. Silvy had said I was the only one she could trust.

His next question slammed me back in my chair in spite of the calm, quiet way he asked it. "Do you think Silvy Montrain killed Miss Minty, Miss Dalling?"

All the breath had gone out of me, as if I'd been physically struck in the chest. It was necessary to draw in more air.

"I don't . . . what I think doesn't carry any weight, does it? Why should you think Silvy did it? I mean, she didn't like Miss Minty, but people don't . . . don't . . ."

"Normal people don't," he agreed. "But there are rumors that Silvy Montrain isn't exactly normal. Of course your opinion isn't concrete evidence, it certainly wouldn't be admissible in court, but as a disinterested observer you might be of considerable help to us. You needn't give it if you don't want to, but I'd appreciate your viewpoint. Do you think Silvy Montrain is normal?"

"I . . ." I thought of the wigs, the far-out clothes, the diamonds (fake or otherwise), the remarks she

had made at various times since I'd been in the house. "Who am I to say what's normal? She's . . . different."

The two officers exchanged glances.

"In what way, Miss Dalling?"

"She . . . she says what she thinks, without worrying about whether it's polite or tactful. She wears those crazy wigs . . ." Immediately I regretted my choice of adjectives. "And her clothes aren't what the . . . the ordinary seventy-year-old woman wears. But then she was once connected with the movies, and she's been wealthy all her life . . . I don't know. I certainly wouldn't be prepared to state that she was insane."

Jamison nodded gently. "But you heard her say she would kill Irene Minty if the other woman touched her again. Do you think she meant it when she said it?"

"The way anyone means it when they say a thing like that." I suppose they thought I was being stubborn, but I simply could not say I thought Silvy a murderess.

Again he took a different tack, leaving me stranded. "What were you wearing earlier today, Miss Dalling? When you were on the archery range with the others, for instance?"

What in heaven's name did that have to do with anything? I stared at him, groping for a clue. What must it be like, to be guilty of some crime, to be trying to protect oneself, to figure out what the point of the question was before you dared to answer it?

"A white shirt and navy blue Bermuda shorts," I said slowly.

"And did you notice what Miss Minty was wearing when you found her?"

The scene was all too vivid in my mind. "A white blouse and a dark skirt, I think."

"A navy blue skirt," Crowell confirmed. "Rather short, not much longer than your Bermudas would have been."

They were both watching me intently, as if what they said had some significance they were waiting for me to catch.

"From the distance at which she was shot, which we believe to have been about seventy-five yards," Jamison said gently, "it might have been difficult to tell the difference between long shorts and a short skirt. Has it occurred to you, Miss Dalling, that whoever shot that arrow might have thought he was shooting at you?"

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I returned his stare in amazement and alarm. "But that's impossible! We didn't look anything alike at all! Miss Minty was nearly twice my age, and she wore her hair differently, and she had freckles . . ."

"She was walking away from her murderer. From the back she must have presented a striking similarity. White blouse, blue skirt or shorts, blonde hair . . . granted, your hair styles were not the same, but you were both fair haired and from that distance braids might easily have been indistinguishable from hair tied back as yours is now. You were both slender, both rather tall. From the back the freckles wouldn't show. We believe there is a distinct possibility . . . or maybe I should say probability . . . that the murderer was after you, not Miss Minty."

There was a hard, aching lump in my chest. After a moment I realized I had suspended my breathing

and took a deep breath. "But . . . there's nothing to substantiate such a supposition . . . ?"

"As a matter of fact," Crowell said, and now his face was hard, grim, "we think there are several things to substantiate it. To begin with, Irene Minty had only been in this house for a matter of hours. She had had no contact with any of the family except to the following extent: she met Mrs. Olivia Montrain, who explained what her duties would be. She was introduced to Emma Hake. As I understand it, there was no question of her supplanting Mrs. Hake as sole companion to Silvy Montrain; she was merely to be a supplemental employee in this capacity. She then met Silvy Montrain, who, admittedly, did not like her and in fact threatened to kill her. However, we all know Silvy Montrain has been an eccentric for years, she is a spoiled woman in many ways and probably knew she could bring the family around if she made enough fuss.

"While you, on the other hand," he went on, leaning slightly toward me, one large hand resting on his thigh, "had been in the house for several days. You knew that the maid had been injured in a way other than by a fall downstairs. You had found what you thought to be the weapon used in this attack, and it's possible that in some way the murderer knew you had seen it. At any rate, the hiding place was decided to be unsafe and the weapon was removed. In addition to this, you yourself had been the victim of an apparent murder attempt less than twenty-four hours ago. Now which seems most likely to you, Miss Dalling? That someone in this household felt the need to eliminate Irene Minty, a complete stranger, or that they

felt that urge in your direction, that they were trying to carry through on what had been bungled last night?"

I was, quite literally, speechless.

Sergeant Crowell had been giving me his full attention; now it was Lieutenant Jamison who moved closer by leaning toward me across the desk.

"In the light of what has just been said, Miss Dalling, can you tell us anything else that might be helpful in this case? Anything you've forgotten up to now, anything you might have considered insignificant, which might possibly have some bearing on the situation?"

Although the air-conditioning kept the room at a cool seventy-five degrees, I was bathed in perspiration. I felt the dress sticking to my back and wished desperately that I had something to drink; my mouth was so dry I couldn't moisten my lips which seemed to be cracking.

"Anything at all," Crowell prompted. "For instance, have you observed enough of Silvy Montrain's behavior to form an opinion as to her sanity?" He held up a hand as if anticipating my protest. "I know you're no psychiatrist, but you've been in this house for a few days and you've watched the woman to some extent. All I want is your impression. Is she crazy, or is she simply senile?"

I shook my head helplessly. "I don't know. She's . . . odd. No question about that. But sometimes she's quite sharp, and I can't tell when she's telling the truth or when she's imagining things . . ."

His face was rapt with interest. "What sort of things does she imagine?"

I told him, then, about the jewelry. "She swears it's all fake . . . she won't wear anything but the diamond rings she's had on ever since I got here. She gave it all to me, asked me to take it to a jeweler for an appraisal."

"And did you?"

"Not yet. There's been no opportunity."

"Does it look genuine to you?"

"Yes, but I've never owned anything but costume jewelry. I couldn't tell anything about it."

The two men exchanged a speaking glance. "We'd like to see the jewelry, Miss Dalling. We'll give you a receipt for it."

"What . . . what if she's right? What if it is paste, imitations of her own stuff?"

"Well, that would seem to indicate that something fishy is going on, wouldn't it? Of course, she might have had copies made herself, not wanting anyone to know she was selling the stuff off because she needed the money. We'll find out about that. One of our men will go with you, to get the stuff."

I cleared my throat. "There's one other thing. I don't know if it means anything, but when she was searching for the jewels . . . when they were missing for a short time . . . Silvy found a diary that had belonged to Gayle Montrain. It was the last one she used before she died. The little girl, Vanessa, had it. She found it after her mother's accident and didn't tell anyone about it. Vanessa was upset at the thought of anyone reading it, and she gave it to me for safekeeping. I had it in my purse and it was taken from there the same time as the note that lured me down to the swimming pool. I have it back, now; Silvy said

she found it in plain sight in a linen closet—as if someone had read it and decided it had no value so Vanessa could have it back."

"Gayle Montrain." I couldn't quite interpret Jamison's tone of voice; I thought it was a blend of admiration, awe, and something else. "You worked on that case, didn't you, Barry? Straightforward accident case, wasn't it?"

"Seemed to be. Except that the autopsy showed she'd ingested a small quantity of barbiturates shortly before her death. Not enough to kill her. But it might have been enough to have made her lose control of her car; she was doing about seventy-five when she hit the curve there on Rohner Road. There was some suspicion of suicide, but on the whole it didn't seem likely; I mean, if she had access to barbiturates in a sufficient quantity to commit suicide why take only a normal dose such as she'd use for sleeping and take a chance on being conscious when she went through a stone wall? It would have been simpler to take the bottleful and stay in her own bed. Besides, there was nothing in her immediate past to suggest any motive for suicide. Unless there was something in the diary."

"Did you read it, Miss Dalling?"

"I skimmed it," I admitted. "I got the impression she was a happy, successful woman with everything to look forward to. Maybe the diary doesn't have anything to do with anything, but it was missing, and then found, and then stolen, and finally discarded again . . ."

"We'll give you a receipt for that, too. All right, Miss Dalling, that's all for now. The officer outside

the door will accompany you upstairs for the jewelry and the diary."

I stood, looking at them uncertainly. "What do I do now? I mean, if it's true that someone intended to shoot me instead of Miss Minty . . . I'm not at all sure I want to stay on here."

"You're free to go whenever you like. We have your home address and phone number. It's likely you'll be asked to testify at the inquest; you'll be notified of that. And if you think of anything else that might be pertinent to the case, we'd appreciate your calling us."

"Yes, of course." Astonishing, how marvelous it felt to be free to go! Of course I would have to talk to David, and I felt guilty about leaving . . . but it didn't make any sense to stay. If David wanted to see me again, he would do so; if he didn't, my remaining here wouldn't accomplish anything.

I turned the diary and the jewels over to the officer with a distinct sensation of relief and went to find David, hoping to be able to talk to him alone. Walking past the living room door, I caught a glimpse of Silvy and remembered what she'd said. That they would try to pin it on her. The trend of the questioning had seemed to indicate that she was, indeed, being seriously considered as a suspect.

David was at the phone extension in the kitchen; I could hear his voice. There was no one else in the room. He hung up as I entered, his face lined, tired, worried.

"Oh, Sandi! I thought they'd never finish with you. I hope you told them everything."

"Yes, everything I could think of, except about the

dresses. I forgot those." I had to explain what I was talking about, although in the light of all that had happened a few ruined clothes seemed unimportant. "They seem to think the killer might have been shooting for me, instead of Miss Minty."

He straightened, the weary lines leaving his face. "What the devil gives them that idea?"

I told him. Gradually his shoulders slumped again. "I see their point, but I can't for the life of me see why anyone would want to harm you. I suppose you want to leave, to go back to the city."

I was glad he'd said it, that I hadn't had to dredge up the words myself. "I think that would be best, don't you? They said I'm free to go."

"Yes, of course. God, I wish I knew what's going on here. You can't stay, naturally, if there's any chance they're right. Look, I'll drive you back to the city as soon as I can get away here. I don't know what Olivia's going to do if they decide to make an arrest . . ."

"An arrest?" Why should I feel this extreme disquietude at the thought? After all, a murder had been committed. "You mean you think they'll arrest Silvy?"

He had moved toward the stove and began to inspect the foods that were still being kept warm there, the dinner no one had gotten around to eating. Lifting the lid from one of the pots he sampled a veal dish.

"I'm starving, aren't you? I don't care about that crew that came out from Hollywood uninvited, but there's no reason the rest of us have to go hungry. Get us a couple of plates and let's have some dinner. You don't mind staying long enough for the police to

wrap things up here, do you? I can hardly walk out on Olivia if there's going to be further unpleasantness."

I brought the plates and held them while he filled them with a variety of foods which wafted mouth-watering scents into my face. "Is that what you think? They'll arrest Silvy?"

"I don't know. I hope not, but I'm afraid of it. Lord, how does anybody know when they're making a mistake? We thought we were doing the right thing to keep her here, but . . ."

I decided it was past time for some plain speaking. Didn't what I had been through entitle me to know some of the facts?

"There was something odd about Gayle's death, wasn't there?" I asked quietly as we settled ourselves at the plastic-topped table. "The police officer said an autopsy showed barbiturates, although not enough to have killed her. The official verdict was accidental death, but Vanessa told me her mother killed herself. And now there seem to be suggestions that . . . that it might have been neither accident nor suicide."

He ate, not as if he enjoyed the food but as if he must have it for the strength he needed to keep going.

"Gayle didn't commit suicide. I'm sure of that, whatever anyone else might have thought. She loved me, she confided in me, there was nothing to suggest that she was unhappy in any way about our life together. If she took that phenobarb herself it was unknowingly . . ."

"But the drug didn't kill her . . ."

"Maybe it did, indirectly. She didn't die from an overdose, in the usual sense of the words . . . but

Gayle reacted violently . . . or maybe I should say she over-reacted . . . to barbiturates. The prescription from which those tablets came was in her name . . . not *my* prescription, thank God . . . but we learned the first time she took one for sleeping that she couldn't tolerate phenobarbital. A one and a half grain tablet really knocked her out; she was groggy for two days afterward. Of course the prescription ought to have been thrown out, but Silvy said she was also having some occasional trouble sleeping, and why waste medicine when she knew she could take it?"

Unseeing, he speared another piece of meat and chewed it, automatically. "So Gayle gave the bottle to Silvy. We don't know how Gayle got it that night she died. I don't think she'd have taken it intentionally, knowing how it would affect her, although there was some talk about it at the time . . . police asking questions and so on. Vanessa overheard them and put her own interpretation on things, apparently. Anyway, Gayle had been asked to run in to the studio for a late night meeting, something urgent that needed a decision. She'd had a headache, but thought she'd be all right to drive if she took a couple of aspirins. I had an early morning appointment and she wouldn't hear of my missing any sleep by going with her. Silvy said she had some aspirins and she brought Gayle two white tablets. I saw her take them. From a distance phenobarb and aspirin would look similar . . . they're both small white tablets."

He took a deep breath. "Silvy says she gave Gayle aspirin from the clearly labeled bottle in her medicine chest. But the facts were that Gayle crashed into a

concrete wall at an excessive speed, and she was killed. Gayle was not a speeder, as a rule; there was no reason for her to have felt under any pressure to hurry to her meeting. She knew the road, the car had just been serviced and checked out; no mechanical defects were discovered. The post-mortem revealed a quantity of phenobarbital in her system. Not enough to have been dangerous, the coroner said. Well, maybe we should have told him how Gayle had been known to react to the phenobarb, but what good would it have done? She was dead, and we didn't believe Silvy had deliberately given her something that could have caused a fatal accident."

"So you just kept an eye on Silvy here at home. Was that the only thing she'd done? Given Gayle the wrong pills?"

He pushed back his plate, shrugging. "You've seen how Silvy is. Part of it is undoubtedly the normal aging process; she forgets more easily than she used to, gets confused. Like forgetting that her old friend Neil Garvin died some time ago. And some of the things she does are intentionally calculated to annoy the twins, I think; they never got along with her the way Gayle did. I suspect there may have been some jealousy on the part of Iona and Iola; I guess you know they were all entertainers together as children, but Gayle was the only one to make a comeback as an adult. And Silvy was more generous with Gayle, never made any pretense of the fact that she liked Gayle better than she did the twins."

And, I added silently, they were envious . . . or was the word covetous? . . . of Gayle's husband,

too. Had they, even before she died, been interested in David?

"She's odd . . . that silly business of all those wigs, for instance. She's grotesque, and not many years ago she'd have been the first to realize it. Well, she seemed odd, but harmless. Olivia wouldn't hear of sending her away from Montrain, so the only solution seemed to be hiring Emma to keep an eye on her. And now Emma's losing control, too."

"Wasn't Emma with Silvy this afternoon? When Miss Minty was killed?" The idea had only just occurred to me.

"She says Silvy was in her room, napping. But there are ways out of a room, for someone who's determined and clever. For all her peculiarities, Silvy is clever. No, Emma can't absolutely swear that Silvy never left her suite, although she doesn't think she did."

Off in the distance, the telephone rang once. We sat sipping coffee, not having enjoyed our meal but feeling better for it, until Iona came to the doorway.

"It's the hospital, Dave. You want to take it out here?"

He had to get up to reach the wall phone and identified himself calmly, steadily. I was always impressed by the effect it had on him, physically, when he was needed by a patient; he laid aside his personal fatigue until such time as he could indulge it.

He listened for a moment, then spoke crisply. "I'll be right there. He's O Positive, so round up all the blood you can get and start typing and crossmatching. If you can't get at least twenty units locally, call

San Francisco and see if they can let us have some." He was checking to see that he had his wallet and his car keys. "I've got to run, Sandi. It's the Harolds boy, the one with hemophilia. He's been in an automobile accident and God only knows if we can pump enough blood into him to keep him alive. Look, I can't wait for you to pack, but I'll take you as soon as I get back. Take care," he said, and was gone, running in a long, easy lope that covered an amazing amount of ground.

Iona was leaning against the door frame, watching me, her dark blue eyes unfathomable. "Are you leaving us, Miss Dalling?"

"Yes. Excuse me, I think I'd better get ready to go."

Her carefully plucked eyebrows rose slightly. "I thought you were to be here for a month."

"My plans have changed," I said coolly. I owed Iona Montrain no explanations. She moved aside for me, her melodious voice following me into the hall. "If Dave's tied up with a hemorrhaging hemophiliac it may be a long time before he gets back. If you're in a hurry I'd be happy to drive you into the city."

She didn't say, *It would be worth the trip to get rid of you,* but I got the message.

"No, thanks," I said. "I'll wait for Dr. Campton."

It was said on the spur of the moment, and I had no idea how long it would be before David could get away from the hospital.

I wonder, if I had agreed to go with her, how much difference it would have made. But I had said I would wait, and for the time being there was nothing else to do.

I wasn't particularly afraid, not then. The house was full of policemen, there were dozens of people around. Nothing more would happen now, surely.

Which only goes to show what a poor prophet I would make.

19

By nine o'clock the police mobile laboratory had moved on. The Hollywood group had climbed into their convertibles and roared off; the remaining members of the family who hadn't eaten previously gathered in the kitchen to pick at the leftovers.

I had no wish to join them. My bags were packed and I had begun to wonder uneasily if I might be stranded here for yet another night. David was often unable to get away from a critical patient and spent the night at the hospital or at his apartment in town.

I would have returned to the study to resume typing, for lack of anything else to do, but Jamison and Crowell were still in there, although they had finished their questioning. I was standing hesitantly before the door when they came out, carrying notebooks and scattering cigarette ashes.

"You still here, Miss Dalling?" Jamison paused. "I thought you were going back to town."

"I am . . . I'm waiting for Dr. Campton. He had an emergency call." That was the point at which I ought to have asked them for a lift as far as a bus line or a taxi stand, but I didn't want to go without talking to David again.

Jamison nodded, understanding the vagaries of a doctor's life. "Well, don't forget to call us if you think of anything that might be helpful. Goodnight, Miss Dalling."

"You aren't . . . making an arrest?"

"No. We haven't enough to go on, as yet, to do that. But don't worry, we will have. Take care of yourself."

I watched them to the front doorway and listened as the sound of the motor died away when the police car had gone. Poor old Eli, the gate-and-grounds-keeper, was getting a workout today.

The Montrains came along the passageway from the opposite direction, and I turned to face them, feeling uncomfortable, knowing they would all be glad when I had gone.

Olivia Montrain showed the strain more than the others. Her assured manner had sloughed off to reveal tension and anxiety; she scarcely seemed aware of me at all, but was scolding half-heartedly at the children.

"But why do we have to go to bed?" Vanessa was demanding. "We never go to bed this early in the summer!"

"*I'm* not going to bed," Willie stated.

"Look, squirts, don't argue, please," Iola told them. "Gram is exhausted, it's been a terrible day, and tomorrow may be a worse one. If you don't

want to go to sleep, swell, stay up and watch the late movie. But go upstairs and take your baths and stay in your rooms, okay?"

"Why is it going to be a worse day tomorrow?" Vanessa wanted to know.

The adults exchanged glances. Did they fear an arrest was imminent? Did they, too, believe that when an arrest was made it would be Silvy?

They all went up the stairs together. No one explained to Vanessa about tomorrow, and she was being contrary, whiney. I didn't blame her, in a way, but I could see how she was getting on everyone's nerves.

Emma and Silvy had eaten in the kitchen tonight, too. Perhaps the Montrains had figured the household was safer with everyone under everyone else's eyes. They came along now after the others had reached the second floor, and I continued to hesitate, wondering if I were brave enough to stay down here and type. Would I be foolish to do anything but lock myself in that room upstairs until I heard from David?

The phone rang, just behind me, and I jumped. I was closer to it than Silvy, and she gestured at me, her diamonds flashing in the light from the great chandelier.

"Well, answer it! Answer it!"

I did so, hoping against hope that it was David. It wasn't. A strange voice asked for Lieutenant Jamison.

"I'm sorry, he's . . ."

"Can't come to the phone, eh?" It was the voice of an elderly man, I thought. "Well, I know how it

is, big investigation and all. Woman got killed out there, eh? Murdered, eh?"

"Lieutenant Jamison has . . ."

"No need to get him to the phone. Just give him the message. This is Jacoby, Jacoby Jewelers, you got that? Just tell him the stuff he sent me is paste. All of it. Pretty good imitations, but that's all it is. Worth about twenty-five hundred dollars at the most, I'd say. I wouldn't give you that, you understand, I only handle the genuine stones. But you might get that much, take them to the right party. You tell the lieutenant that, eh?"

I started again to relay the information that the police officers had gone, but it was too late. Mr. Jacoby had hung up.

Silvy had paused beside me and was staring avidly, licking at lips crookedly lipsticked in too bright a color. "Who was that?"

I spoke slowly, my mind churning. "A Mr. Jacoby, calling for the police."

"Jacoby? The jeweler? Did he see that trash everyone insists is my jewelry? What did he say?"

Emma hovered in the background, uneasy, stretching out a hand as if to prod her charge into movement, but drawing it back without making contact.

Well, it was Silvy's, why not tell her? "He said it was paste. That it was worth about twenty-five hundred dollars, all told."

A claw-like hand reached out, the talons gripping my wrist as Silvy leaned closer, hissing in a confidential manner.

"What did I tell you? They tried to talk me out of my jewels, said nobody wears flashy stuff like that

any more, said we needed the money. I refused to give them up, so they stole them and had them copied, just the way I said!"

"Who tried to get you to sell them?" I asked, unthinking of the open stairway and the possibility of listening ears. "The Montrains all have money, don't they?"

Silvy snorted. "Used to have, but it's all gone now, has been for years! Why do you think the twins hold those menial jobs they have? Quite a come down, after you've been a darling little screen star! Wouldn't have been quite so bad if Gayle hadn't been such a hit! But there's no room for three sisters in the movie business, all looking so much alike, don't you see? No, there's no money left among the Montrains, except what I've got. My Rudy was more farsighted than most; he left me comfortably fixed. Why do you think they're such pinch pennies? One maid, for this whole house! A woman comes in once a week to do the heavy work! Olivia is a regular kitchen slave, when she used to have twenty servants!"

"But they continue to live well . . ."

"Of course, because David foots the bills! But it's a strain on even his purse, let me tell you! If he hadn't inherited money as well as earned it, they'd have had to sell Montrain when Gayle died. It was her money kept it going as long as it did, along with what I pay for my keep here. They were left reasonably well off, not as well as Rudy left me but better than most people, but they weren't willing to cut down on anything! They had to have parties and clothes and furs and jewels . . . it always griped them, that I had so many jewels, but they were a form of savings,

don't you see? And now they're gone, and all I have left is a lot of junk!"

I didn't know what to think. Silvy undoubtedly talked nonsense on occasion, but she'd been right about the diamonds. Was she right about anything else, as well? In the matter, for instance, of her belief that she would be framed for the murder of Irene Minty?

"I saw you'd packed your things," Silvy said, lowering her voice. "You're going away? Tonight?"

"As soon as Dr. Campton gets back he's taking me home," I confirmed.

Her request was completely unexpected.

"Sandi, take me with you."

Involuntarily, I took a step backward, but her hand clung to my arm. "It's not safe here any more . . . not for you, not for me. Take me with you. I told you they'd try to pin that murder on me, and I heard some of the whispers tonight. They think I did it, don't they?"

They also thought there was a strong possibility that I had been the intended victim, not Miss Minty. And if Silvy were guilty, if she had for some unknown reason had a hand in Gayle's death, if she had attacked Toni and attempted to drown me, if she had pulled the bowstring when Irene Minty died, the last person in the world I wanted for company was Silvy.

On the other hand, what if she were a victim, the same as I? What if I left her here and she came to harm?

"We'll have to ask David," I temporized. "He should be coming back soon."

Over her shoulder I caught Emma's gaze, fright-

ened, uncertain. This was a decision I couldn't make by myself, but there was no reason why I should. Let David decide what to do about Silvy.

"I'm going to pack my things, too," Silvy informed me. "Come on, Emma, you'll need a suitcase, too. Enough for tonight and a few days, at least. I've plenty of money, as soon as I can get to a bank; we'll check in at a good hotel until we can make some plans."

Emma cast me an appealing glance, but I had no comfort to offer her. I knew, now, that I couldn't stay alone in the study to work; I would lock myself in the bedroom until David got here.

We were on the lower steps when again the phone summoned. Emma caught it this time, and then passed it to me.

"Sandi?" I went weak with relief, until he continued to speak. "Look, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to get back there for hours . . . maybe not until morning. This child is critical . . . I can't leave him."

I had read about one's heart dropping into the stomach; now I knew what it felt like.

"If you don't want to stay through the night, the only thing I can suggest is to call a taxi. Don't worry about the cost of it . . . call the local cab, the number's written on the inside of the phone book, the one in the hall. Tell him I'll take care of the bill the next time I see him. OK?"

Disappointment was a bitter taste in my mouth. "Yes, of course, if you think so. David," his name came without thought, "there's something I think you ought to know. Silvy wants to go with me."

He swore, astounded. "Tell her nothing doing. Where's Emma, for God's sake?"

"She's here, too. Look, it was true, what she said . . . about the jewels."

"The jewels?" He sounded bewildered, and I knew his mind was much more with that hemorrhaging child than it was with the current events at Montrain.

"The police sent them to a jeweler. They're paste. All of them. They were genuine stones originally, weren't they?"

Behind me Silvy sputtered indignantly, but I heard his reply, following another oath. "Yes, they were worth a fortune. Oh, Lord, I don't know what to say, Sandi! This is a matter for the police to figure out, not a doctor. I'm too close to all the people involved, I can't be objective. But tell Silvy no, she can't go with you."

"What about the children?" I tried not think how I would handle Silvy. She wouldn't accept a simple refusal, not if I knew Silvy.

"The kids? But they're half Montrains, they surely aren't in any danger from their own relatives . . ."

"Gayle was a Montrain, too," I reminded him.

In the ensuing silence I heard a voice in the background, quickened with urgency. "Dr. Campton, can you come immediately . . ."

"All right. I'll be right there. Sandi, call a cab. Take the kids. Don't worry about clothes, don't tell anyone you're going, except call down to the gatehouse to get Eli to open up for the taxi. Just get out of there, go to a hotel or whatever you like. Call my office number and give my answering service the name of the hotel."

There was no time to reply, for again the voice came, "Doctor, hurry . . ." and he was gone. I think the nurse replaced the receiver.

"What did he say?" Silvy demanded. "Can I go with you?"

I knew that to tell her the truth, to say that David had advised leaving her here, might easily bring on a rage that would rouse the entire household, and that was the last thing I meant to do. Hoping to heaven she couldn't read anything in my face, I lied.

"Yes, but we'll have to wait until he comes. It may be several hours, or even morning, but he said for us to get ready. We're to lock ourselves in our rooms and stay until he calls for us."

It was the best I could do for her, I thought. If it weren't Silvy, if one of the others was responsible and wished her any harm beyond the loss of her precious stones, it might keep her safe.

Her face contorted in what was intended as a grin. "All right, let's go pack, Emma! And we'll lock ourselves in until David comes!"

Emma's eyes searched my face as if to discover whether or not I meant it; I could only force a smile and nod, hoping she'd be able to cope with whatever came up. I'd have all I could do to get out of this place.

I had to pretend to go to my room and lock myself in, too. I did, in fact, do this, in case anyone happened to be listening. If only there were a telephone in this room, so that I wouldn't have to creep back down those stairs into an empty first floor . . .

How absurd. If the floor were empty, it couldn't

possibly be dangerous. And I'd have to go down, eventually, to get to the taxi.

A belated realization struck me as I moved my luggage to the area near the door. David had said to call Eli to open the gate. I had no idea how to do that.

For only seconds panic surged through me, and then reason reasserted itself. I had to take the children, and they would know how to reach Eli.

I waited fifteen agonizing minutes, hoping that by then everyone else would be settled down. Even then I took the precaution of going out through the bathroom and Gayle's room, rather than out my own door, for it was further away from the rooms occupied by the Montrains.

During that time, I thought—about David and his children (trapped in this house by the needs . . . or the greeds? . . . of these people), of Silvy whose only treasures had been stolen, of the twin sisters jealous of a third, of Olivia who did not want the world to know that she was no longer wealthy and that she had a sister who was a mental case.

It had been hinted that Silvy had, either deliberately or accidentally, provided Gayle with barbiturate tablets that had caused or contributed to her death. Yet Gayle had been her favorite of the three sisters. I remembered how her face had crumpled painfully when she told me, "Gayle's dead, you know. She was in a terrible crash . . . her poor body all smashed and bloody."

Was there any reason to think Silvy had wanted Gayle dead? Why should she? Not for money, ob-

viously. Silvy put a great deal of stock in her valuables; although I had no idea whether or not she really was still wealthy, there was no doubt that she owned a fortune in jewels. Or had, until someone had substituted imitations for them. Iona, who worked at such things? It seemed too obvious for Iona to be the one. Any of them would have known how to go about having the jewels copied.

It occurred to me, at that point, that if there was a shortage of funds as Silvy insisted, and the jewels were insured, it might be to anyone's advantage to have the insurance company reimburse Silvy for them. Under what circumstances would they do so? Certainly they wouldn't simply hand over a check without an attempt to recover the stones.

Get back to Gayle's death, I thought. For that's where it started, wasn't it? Weren't the things that were happening now connected with Gayle's death in a car crash?

Who would have benefited from Gayle's death? David, presumably, and their children. David would never have caused her death, not for financial reasons. He had money of his own, it sounded as if he were supporting this household, if Silvy's information could be relied upon. And he and Gayle had been deeply in love.

The twins had been jealous of their more famous sister . . . they, too, were beautiful and talented, yet she was the one who became famous and wealthy. But I couldn't see how they could have benefited from her death to any extent that would make it worthwhile to plan for such a thing.

It was time to go. I moved quietly in a pair of rub-

er soled tennis shoes, carrying a suitcase in each and. I couldn't carry everything, but David would et the rest for me later.

I used the back stairs, although it was the long vay around. There was no one moving in the house o far as I could tell. The usual small nightlights urned in the lower hallway so that I had no trouble naking my way to the front door.

I left the luggage there and went quietly back up he stairs to Vanessa's room. She rose on one elbow, linking, when I closed the door and switched on the ght.

"Sandi? What's the matter? Is someone sick?"

"No, not exactly. Vanessa, your father called me. He wants me to take you and Willie into town with ne."

"Now?" She wrinkled her nose in dismay. "In the niddle of the night?"

"It isn't all that late. I need to call Eli to open he gate for a taxi. How do I get him?"

She gave me the number, moving obediently to et dressed when I told her to.

"Get Willie up, too. Just put on some ordinary veryday clothes. Can you be very quiet and come own the back stairs without anyone hearing you?"

The sleepiness went out of her eyes. "What's going n? Why are we running away in secret?"

"I can't explain it to you; your father will do that ater. Will you do it? Dress and move very quietly?"

"Is someone trying to kill us?"

It was asked so matter-of-factly that for a moment couldn't credit what she'd said. My first thought vas to reassure her, but immediately I knew that it

would be false comfort and possibly dangerous. Besides, she didn't seem on the verge of panic.

"I hope not," I temporized, "but it's possible someone doesn't like me very much. I don't think I'm safe in this house any longer, and your father doesn't think so, either. He wants us all out . . . you, Willie, and me."

She didn't ask any more questions but began to dress. I thought she could be trusted to get Willie downstairs and I went to call Eli from the downstairs phone.

Dialing . . . so loud in the silence! . . . raised the hair on the back of my neck and on my bare arms. To my intense gratification the old man answered on the second ring. He agreed to let the taxi in as soon as he could get dressed. I apologized for waking him and instantly upon hanging up I got through to the taxi company.

I felt better when this was accomplished, and better yet when Vanessa and Willie appeared with conspiratorial expressions to join me in the lower hallway. I touched a finger to my lips and they nodded; heaven only knew what she'd told her little brother, but Willie, though sleepy, was docile and obedient.

It was not until half an hour had passed that I was sure something had gone wrong.

"Maybe you'd better check with Eli again," Vanessa suggested in a theatrical whisper. "It never takes more than ten minutes to get a taxi."

Willie lifted wide eyes blurred with fatigue. "Is somebody going to shoot us?"

"No," I said before Vanessa could form a reply.

didn't like the look in her eye. "Be quiet, and I'll all Eli again; maybe he went back to sleep."

I picked up the phone but before I could dial I new it was useless.

The phone was dead. I was trapped in this house, esponsible for two children, with someone who vanted me dead.

20

"What's the matter?"

Vanessa came toward me, making no sound on the polished floor but speaking too loudly. I put a cautioning finger to my lips, glancing up the stairway with some apprehension.

I motioned them toward the doorway. There was no point in trying to take my luggage; it would only be a handicap and the gates were a long way from the house. There was no question of remaining where we were. I knew that without having to make a conscious decision. We might be safe, locked in our rooms upstairs, but I could not be sure of that. Besides, David wouldn't be worrying about us because he would think we had already left. He wouldn't hurry to get back to us.

I herded the kids out the front door, closing it behind us with a gentle click. There were the usual out-

loor lights on iron posts outlining the drive; I would ave turned them off if I'd known how. The darkness vas far less frightening than being silhouetted against hat white shell drive that crunched alarmingly unler our feet.

I stepped off onto the grass, indicating that the hildren were to do the same. Willie stumbled and earl y went down. We caught him between us, each olding a hand, and forced him on.

"There's another telephone at the gatehouse, isn't here?" I asked in a whisper. "Where Eli lives?"

"Yes."

"A different number from the one at the house?"

"Yes. Did someone cut the telephone wires?" It vas astonishing, how they took in stride these things hat were so terrifying to me, but I remembered they ad been raised on a diet of television, where things ike severed telephone lines were commonplace.

"I think so," I admitted. "How far is it, the gatehouse, from the gates?"

"Not too far," Vanessa said. "Maybe whoever ut the telephone wires killed Eli, too."

"Shot him?" Willie wanted to know, reviving somewhat at this interesting turn of conversation.

"Don't talk," I said tersely. "Just walk as fast s you can."

But we couldn't walk fast enough. I don't know if t's possible to hear the passage of an arrow as it approaches, but I sensed it, perhaps. Something made me begin to turn, throwing my shoulders sideways o the house so that I gave the archer a narrower arget.

The arrow grazed my upper arm, scarcely more than a pin-prick, although it left a thin tracing of red.

Vanessa yelped and jerked at Willie's hand as he paused, mesmerized, looking back. There was a *thuck* as the arrow buried itself in one of the trees beside the drive; I didn't have to take a closer look at it to know that it wasn't a target arrow but one of the broadheads with the razor-edged blades, an arrow designed to kill.

"Why is Aunt Silvy shooting at us?" Willie demanded, and stupid as it was, I couldn't help looking back.

She was there on the front steps, plainly in view between the lights at either side of the white door. She wore the flaming red wig in the elaborate, outdated style, and the silver lame pantsuit; as I watched she fitted another arrow to the bow.

"Run!" I commanded, and pulled the children off the shell drive, heading in a more direct route toward the gates, trying to get beyond the range of the lights, under the trees.

This time the arrow was a clean miss, but not by much. I saw it plow into the earth ahead and slightly to the right of me. The children needed no urging; I let Willie go, figuring they could make better time without me.

Expecting an arrow between my shoulder blades any moment, remembering the way Irene Minty had looked lying in the afternoon sun with the blood drying on her white shirt, I ran as I had never run in my life. There is something about running *for* your life that makes superhuman effort possible.

We were out of the light, beyond the drive; there was no way the archer could see us now, but we didn't slacken our pace. Somewhere ahead of us were the gates, and once through them we'd be safe.

There was no logic to the thought; no reason to believe that the woman who wanted to kill us . . . me? . . . would not or could not follow beyond those gates.

Somehow I had expected the darkness of the grounds to extend to the gates, but it did not. There they were ahead of us, slicing across the crushed shell drive, intricate wrought iron gates as high was the walls . . . and brilliantly lighted as if welcoming a party.

There was no sign of either a taxi beyond nor Eli on this side of those gates. We paused, with me sobbing for breath, just under the protection of the nearest trees. There was no sign of an archer in a red wig and silver lame but there were plenty of shadows along the edge of the drive. Did I dare walk up to the gates to try them? There was a chance Eli had already unlocked them and gone back to his little house, somewhere beyond our range of vision.

"They're locked," Vanessa said. "They're always locked."

"Is that the only way out of here?" My chest heaved, aching, as my eyes ached searching the shadows.

"No. There's another gate, a little one. On the back of the orange grove."

My heart sank. Such a long way off . . . and opening where? On some back country road?

"It's locked, too," she went on. "The trucks use

it, when they come to fertilize or irrigate or when they pick the oranges. Eli's got the key to that gate, too."

I drew in a breath and finally got one that didn't make my chest ache. "All right. Then we've got to get to Eli." That meant crossing the white shell drive under those lights that seemed so bright, although I knew they were all small bulbs.

Were the kids in danger, or was it only me?

Immediately I knew the answer to that. The kids had seen the outrageously garbed archer, the same as I had, and she knew it. She couldn't allow witnesses to tonight's performance.

"Count three, and we'll all run," suggested Vanessa.

"No. You two stay here. Tell me how to get to Eli's house."

"I don't want to stay here," Willie protested, beginning to whimper. "I don't want to be shot."

I looked behind us, through the trees which effectively screened the house. There was no way of telling whether or not we had been followed, whether we were being stalked through the deep shadows beyond the range of those lamps.

"No one is going to shoot you," I told him firmly. "It's me they're after."

"Why?" Vanessa asked.

"I wish I knew. But that isn't important. Getting out of here is. You're sure the gates are locked?"

Her thin shoulders moved expressively. "Eli's pretty careful with them. Aunt Silvy got out once and there was a terrible fuss. Ever since they've always been locked."

"What did she do, when she got out?" I was star-

ng at the expanse of lighted drive, calculating how ong it would take to cross it.

"Nothing much, really, but Gram was afraid she'd lo something. I don't know what. Sandi, what are ve going to do?"

I drew in a deep breath. "You two are going to vait here. Sit down by that bush over there and . . ." orstalling more protests, ". . . be my lookouts. Keep still and watch, make sure we aren't followed. 'm going to try to get to Eli's gatehouse and use that elephone. We have to have some help."

Willie whimpered and Vanessa quickly shushed im. "Come on, pretend we're in a TV program and hey want to film it right the first time. Sandi's the lirector, and she said what to do. That bush, Sandi?"

"Yes. Now, if I cross the drive and go straight long the wall I'll come to the gatehouse? How far is t?"

"Not very far. Half as far as from here to the house, naybe."

"All right. I'll be back as soon as I can," I prom-sed, and squeezed her hand.

For all that the bulbs were small and dim, I felt s if I were embarking on a brilliantly lighted stage. f the archer waited, just out of sight, she could not ail to note my passage. How many of those lethal roadheads had she carried with her out of the house? Or had she retrieved the ones she'd shot earlier?

I ran, the white shells crunching underfoot, ex-ecting any minute to feel the searing pain of an ar-ow in my flesh, but at least this time I presented a esser target, not the broad one of my full back.

I reached the shadows on the far side, already

winded but not daring to stop. There was no discernible path, but the wall which marked the boundary of Montrain served as a guide; I could see the pale gleam of it between the scattered trees.

If Eli were up . . . and he should be up, since I had called him . . . there ought to be a light, I thought hopefully. And there it was . . . only a flicker, seeming to move as I ran, but a light. After I called the taxi, had it come but left after waiting in vain for someone to open the gate? But that would mean there was some reason why Eli hadn't been able to get to the gate . . .

I almost ran into the cottage. The light was some distance off, and I saw that it was bobbing although I had come to a halt, one hand resting on a corner of the small stucco gatehouse. Someone was approaching me with a flashlight.

Silvy? Carrying a bow and more of those brutal arrows?

I had to get into the cottage to reach the telephone and call for help. I began to grope my way along the wall, but before I came to a door I encountered something else. Not with my hands, but with me feet; I nearly fell over the obstruction and I knew with a sick horror what it was.

Only a human body could be so heavy, so large, so soft yet unyielding.

Eli moaned faintly when I stumbled over him, and relief left me limp, trembling. He wasn't dead, only unconscious, for he didn't reply when I spoke to him in a whisper.

The bobbing light was almost upon me; I must get past Eli, find a door, locate the telephone—all without turning on a light anywhere to give myself away?

"Fat chance," I muttered, but I stepped over poor Eli and immediately came to the doorway. The door was open; the interior of the cottage was warm and dark and smelled of recently cooked food. I'd have to chance a light. There wasn't a hope of finding the telephone before the runner with the flashlight got here, not in the dark.

The sudden light hurt my eyes, forcing me to blink. A small room, a combination kitchen-sitting room, comfortable, shabby. Where would the telephone be?

It was on a low table beside the easy chair whose cushions must conform to the shape of Eli's body. A book had been put down beside it, as if he'd been reading when he answered it.

My hand was icy when I picked up the receiver. If this phone, too, had been put out of commission . . .

It had not. The line hummed reassuringly as I dialed 0 for operator, trying to still my trembling.

A professionally pleasant voice said, "Operator. May I help you?" and just then footsteps sounded in the open doorway. I looked up to see a white face over the glow of the flashlight; her breathing was labored and heavy.

"This is the operator, may I help you?" the voice repeated in my ear, and I gathered enough air to say, "Give me the police, please . . . the Sheriff's Department."

"She's gone, Miss Silvy's gone," Emma said, the

flashlight slipping out of her limp fingers. "You mustn't call the police, though, Mrs. Montrain will have a fit . . ."

"It's gone too far now, Emma. We have to have the police," I told her. A moment later I was explaining our predicament to a Deputy Sheriff who promised to send a patrol car and an ambulance immediately.

Emma sank into a chair, on the verge of tears. "They'll fire me now for sure. She got away from me. I had the outer hall door locked but she must have come across a key somewhere . . ."

"They're going to have to lock her up, Emma. Not here, with you for a jailer, or someone like Miss Minty. She tried to kill me, and Eli's hurt. Give me your light, we'd better see what we can do for him."

The man had been struck over the head; the weapon lay beside him, the same hammer that had struck down Toni. This time no one had attempted to wash the blood off from it. Eli was breathing stertorously and the single wound on his head had bled rather heavily, but he didn't appear to be in imminent danger of dying. I didn't know what to do for him and the police and the ambulance would be here within a few minutes. Still, it didn't seem right to go off and leave him alone, crumpled on his own doorstep.

"I've got to go back to where I left the kids. Will you stay here with him?"

Terror flared in Emma's eyes, but she gulped and nodded. "Miss . . . they won't hurt Miss Silvy, will they?"

"I don't think so. She . . . isn't responsible, I suppose."

I left her there. I thought she was crying.

The children were where I had left them, but they were not alone. As I approached, another figure stepped out of the shadows and stood waiting for me. Silvy, and in her hand, firmly held, was a small revolver.

21

There was nothing for it but to walk right up to her. Remember, I cautioned myself, she's irrational, but there's a streak of sanity in her most of the time. Try to reason with her.

"Sandi! I thought you'd taken off without me!"

"No, I was only trying to get a taxi," I evaded. I sighed when she dropped the hand holding the gun so that it pointed earthward. "You kids all right?"

"She sneaked up on us," Willie said. "We didn't hear her until she was right here. . . ."

"It's all right. I'm sure you listened as hard as you could." Only now did I take in Silvy's appearance. She had changed wigs, into a bouffant ash blonde one, and she wore an embroidered red satin tunic with Chinese dragons on it over black velvet trousers. She was barefooted, which no doubt helped to account for her silent progress over the grass.

"We've got to get out of here," Silvy informed me.

I fought a hysterical urge to laugh.

"Where's Eli? Isn't he coming to open the gate?"

"Eli is indisposed." Good grief, why hadn't I thought to search his pockets for the keys? It hadn't even occurred to me. "I've called the police, Silvy. They'll be here any minute. Why don't you give me that gun?"

She stared at me. "What for? It isn't loaded, I couldn't find any shells for it. David keeps them all locked up, but I hoped I could bluff with it if I had to. I'm scared, I don't mind telling you. They make out that I'm crazy, but there's someone else in that house besides me that's been bitten by a mad dog. They're going to make out that I killed that Minty woman, because I said I'd kill her if she touched me again. But I didn't have to touch her to get rid of her, all I had to do was put up a fuss. After all, it's my money paying for my own keepers. I'm not going to be around to be blamed for anything else they've cooked up."

This time it was I who stared. "Silvy, where were you half an hour ago?"

"Half . . . ? In my room, I guess. I heard someone unlock the door into the corridor, and I called out but no one answered. It wasn't Emma, Emma would have answered. It was taking too long, I didn't understand why someone didn't come to say it was time to leave, and I was afraid . . ."

"You didn't shoot at us?" I asked slowly, watching her face.

It registered nothing but astonishment; I must remember this woman was an actress of sorts.

"Shoot at you? I told you, I couldn't find any ammunition."

"I mean with a bow. Two arrows, one of them scratched me." I moved so that she could see the thin tracing of dried blood.

"Lord, no, what gave you that idea? I haven't shot a bow in ages. And why would I want to shoot you?" Surprise gave way to anger. "I told you, I'd be blamed for whatever went on. They want me out of here, locked up somewhere, and this is how they'll do it. Make it look as if I'm a homicidal maniac."

"But your sister has been fighting to keep you out of an institution . . ."

"Oh? And who's fighting to put me in one?" she demanded.

I couldn't tell her it was David who'd insisted it must now be done. I tried to keep my own face blank as my mind raced. Was it possible Silvy was telling the truth, that she had not been the mysterious archer?

"We saw . . . someone. In a red wig, wearing that silver lame pantsuit of yours."

"I took it off as soon as I went upstairs and put it out to be cleaned. You don't think I'd go to a hotel in the middle of the night in an outfit like that, do you?" she asked, and inadvertently I dropped my eyes to the golden dragon coiling over the red satin tunic. "I've got seven red wigs . . . anybody could have borrowed one. You didn't see my face under it, did you?"

I had to admit we hadn't been close enough, nor the light good enough, to enable us to identify the face. "But your family has no reason to want to . . .

to frame you for . . . for murder, or attempted murder."

"Don't they? Put me away and let me rave about my stolen jewels . . . while they've sold them off and are living it up on my money. If they commit me no doubt they'll find a way to get their hands on the cash I have left, too. Poor crazy Silvy, what does she need with money? They're desperate for money, haven't you realized that? Oh, certainly, David pays for the upkeep on the estate, keeps it nice so nobody knows the Montrains are broke. But he doesn't pay for the luxuries beyond decent eating. He won't pay for fancy clothes and jewels. Don't you know how it burns Iona to have to wear that fake stuff she makes? And most of the clothes Olivia has are years and years old, I can't remember when she's had a new evening dress. They can't take trips to Europe and give the parties they used to give. Oh, yes, they'd have a great time on my money, if they could get their hands on it."

Was she right? If Silvy hadn't shot at us, then one of the others had. It was true—anyone could have taken one of her wigs, anyone could have put on the silver lame pantsuit, although it would have been a tight fit on either of the twins. Olivia was much the same size as Silvy herself.

I looked at her in an agony of indecision. Could I trust Silvy, or not?

The scream of a siren cut the air and a moment later the police arrived.

It took about three minutes, a dozen keys, and a bit of mild profanity to open the locked gates. The ambulance was directed to the gatehouse, and one

of the officers announced to us that he was putting Silvy under arrest.

She was chalky under the ash blonde wig, but she went with them without a fuss. Only her eyes showed any life when she took a last look at me. "Don't let them do this, Sandi. I may be batty, but I'm not a killer."

I could find nothing to say to her. They couldn't convict her without proof, could they? But it wouldn't come to that, they would say she was insane and there might not even be a trial . . .

I was shaking with fatigue and release of tension. The officer smiled at me reassuringly.

"Go on back to the house, Miss. We'll be along as soon as we've attended to the old man . . . that one won't crack anyone else over the head, I promise you."

But what if it hadn't been Silvy? What if someone had only wanted it to appear that Silvy had attempted to kill me, had struck down Toni and Eli, had in fact killed Irene Minty? What if Silvy were right all the way, and it was simply a matter of getting her committed to an institution and enjoying the proceeds? Was one of the Montrain women diabolical enough to have planned all this to look as if Silvy were the guilty one?

We went back to the house with the promise that a taxi would be called for us, that within a few minutes we would be on our way to the city and safety. There was no reason why we couldn't take our luggage; I suggested to Vanessa that while I took the remainder of my things downstairs she might as well

ack a few clothes and pajamas for herself and Wil-
ie.

I had taken my own luggage down to the front
loor and was on my way back up to help the kids
vhen they converged on me from the head of the
tairs. Olivia, Iona, and Iola. All of them fully dressed,
lthough they had ostensibly retired some time ago.
All of them looking, to my vision blurred with fa-
igue, somewhat menacing.

There was nothing to be afraid of. I spoke aloud
o reassure myself. "The police will be here in a few
ninutes; they're at the gates now."

"I heard the sirens. What's happened?" Olivia's
ace was gray with strain and apprehension.

"Eli was hit over the head with a hammer. The
mbulance is taking him away. The police . . . have
rrested Silvy."

If I had expected shocked exclamations, I was
lisappointed. No surprise, nothing written across those
hree lovely faces, nothing I could read.

Iona was the one who broke the silence as she ex-
aled audibly. "It's over, then. Thank God for that
. . there won't be any more violence."

Not with Silvy locked up, I thought; whether or
ot she did all those things, there won't be any more
ncidents now. Not if they want to convict Silvy. But
vas she responsible for them? *Was she?*

"Did she . . . admit anything?" That was Oli-
ia, stiff, controlled.

"No. She said . . . she said she was being
ramed."

"Oh, Lord." Iola shook her head. "Poor old Silvy.

But it had to come, she was getting nuttier by the day."

I took a step toward them so that they had to separate to let me through. "Excuse me, I'm taking the children back to the city with me as soon as our taxi arrives . . ."

There was a small splutter of protest, I thought from all three of them. "Why? What for? There's no reason to take the children . . ."

"David asked me to." Four little words, dropped into a deadly silence. I could read that, all right, even though they didn't spell it out for me. If David were taking the children away, did that mean he was also withdrawing his support of Montrain? But then, maybe with the proceeds from Silvy's jewels (they didn't know that the police were now aware of the substitution) David's support would no longer be essential.

"Excuse me." I moved past them. I could feel their eyes following me . . . those beautiful Montrain eyes, all of them cold, all of them . . . deadly.

Vanessa had packed fairly well but needed help getting the suitcase closed. I sat on it while she fastened the locks. When we went out into the hall the Montrains, mother and daughters, were gone. I could hear their voices downstairs.

"Go ahead," I told Vanessa. "I forgot something. I'll be along in a minute."

I couldn't go without trying to make sure, I thought. If Silvy were guilty of the terrible things that had happened here, there would be nothing I or anyone else could do for her, except to see that she was kept as comfortable as possible in a mental institution.

But if she were not guilty, if she had indeed been framed, then I was determined that it should not be Silvy in a place with barred windows.

Whoever had shot at us, dressed in that outlandish silver lame pantsuit and the red wig, had not had a great deal of time to change and dispose of the outfit. If it had been returned to Silvy's room it would prove nothing, but wasn't there just a chance that there hadn't yet been the opportunity to replace it? Or that there might be some clue . . . the bow itself, the broadhead arrows . . . something to reveal the truth?

I was beyond caring what they would think if they caught me. I was leaving this house forever, and David was the only one whose opinion I valued and he would want to know the truth as much as I.

Olivia's room was orderly, beautiful, austere. I had time for only a cursory look into closets, bathroom, drawers. There was nothing out of place, nothing that didn't belong there.

Iola's room was done in blue and white, a little girl's room that had not been updated much with her advancing years. Again it offered nothing in the way of clues, and by this time I was convinced it was hopeless. Anyone who had plotted against Silvy had hidden the evidence so that it would never be found.

Discouragement notwithstanding, I entered Iona's room. Much more sophisticated, this, with a number of luxury touches that must have strained her salary. The clothes that overflowed the closet were neither old nor inexpensive. Not that that proved anything, one way or the other.

The bathroom, too, was innocent of red wigs or

silver pantsuits. I turned, despairing, and the door opened to reveal Iona standing there, her blue eyes glacial.

"Well, are you lost, Miss Dalling? Or should I call you Sandi, since you're almost in the family?"

I didn't know what she was talking about, but the venom in her voice was clear.

"You are, aren't you? I noticed that it's *David* already. And he can't keep his hands off you, can he? Very touching, I'm sure. What are you doing in my room?"

My mouth was dry but I faced her defiantly, knowing that the police would be in the house any minute, knowing she couldn't risk doing anything to me now, if she were the guilty one. It couldn't be blamed on Silvy this time.

"Looking to see what you did with the red wig and the silver pantsuit," I admitted, watching for some revelation. But this girl, although she couldn't make it professionally as an adult actress, yet had excellent control of her facial muscles.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The ones you wore when you shot at us." That was a guess at random, it need not have been Iona. But I had seen the way she looked at David, the way she tried to keep me away from him, and she might easily have wanted Silvy's money as well as David.

"You're talking in riddles," she said, contempt clearly showing.

"Oh, no, I'm not. I know Silvy didn't kill anybody . . . didn't even try to kill anybody."

She gestured with one graceful hand. "OK, help yourself. Look around. Find any clues?"

Her attitude, one of quiet amusement, infuriated me.

"Oh, I didn't find the wig or the pantsuit. But you made a mistake. You shouldn't have brought the wig in here. There's very little excuse for a girl with jet black hair to have red hairs on her dressing table. Is there?"

It had been an exploratory thrust, and for the first time Iona was unable to control the situation completely; her expression didn't change, but her eyes went instinctively to the dressing table. Triumph surged inside me. I was right! She had worn that wig! But how could I prove it?

My elation was short-lived. Her faint smile returned. "You're behind the times, Miss Dalling. Lots of brunettes have red wigs. Silvy isn't the only one who likes a change of pace. I can't match her collection, but I have four wigs. One of them is red. They're in the closet, on the top shelf . . . see for yourself."

She might have been bluffing. I whipped open the closet door, although I'd already looked inside it. Sure enough, in a row of hat boxes over my head, I found the wigs. But Iona had outsmarted herself, for in one of them, tumbling out when I angrily ripped the wig from its stand, was something she had surely forgotten.

It fell to the floor at my feet and I picked it up, feeling strangely sick now that I had found it.

It was a black rubber bathing cap.

"You've explained the red hairs," I admitted. "It will be more difficult to explain this, I think. I'll hand

it over to the police and testify as to where I found it . . . and when I saw it before."

Some of my confidence evaporated when she stepped into the room and deliberately closed the door behind her. "The hell you will," she said in a tone so quiet, so meaningful, that I took an involuntary step backward. "Give it to me."

Fright came rushing back as I remembered the ferocity of her previous assaults; I could only shake my head. Were the police here yet? If I were to scream, would anyone but the Montrains hear me?

"Why did you do it?" I demanded hoarsely. "To cover up the fact that you'd stolen Silvy's jewels? Are they really worth half a million dollars?"

A muscle twitched in her cheek. "You're just full of information, aren't you?"

"You replaced the jewels and you want to force her into an institution. By killing Miss Minty, and trying to kill me, and attacking Toni and Eli . . . how did you expect to prove that she did those things, instead of you?"

"I've been doing pretty well at convincing people," she reminded me, taking another step in my direction. "I don't think you're going to foul things up for me at this stage."

"What did you have against me?" I knew the answer as soon as I spoke. "You want David, don't you? Did you want him badly enough to have something to do with the way Gayle died?"

That, too, was a shot in the dark, but it paid off. The muscle twitched again. She wasn't going to be actress enough to withstand an interrogation by an

expert, I thought, but I couldn't be too complacent over the knowledge. She remained between me and the door. I remembered how strong she had been, that night she'd tried to hold me underwater.

"You've really been poking around since you got here, haven't you? Well, a lot of good it will do you. Yes, I wanted David. I've always wanted David. And I'll have him, too. He'll forget you soon enough."

"How did you give Gayle the barbiturates?" Keep her talking, I thought, try to get to a door, a window . . . didn't one of those windows open onto a sundeck?

"It wasn't hard. She said she wanted a couple of aspirin. Silvy offered to get some for her. I knew there were barbiturates in Silvy's aspirin bottle. I just kept still while Gayle took them."

I blinked, bewildered. "Why?"

"Why were the barbiturates in Silvy's aspirin bottle? Because," her tone dropped an octave and took on an edge, "she's a damn fool about medicines, if she takes two aspirins and they don't work within ten minutes she'll take four more. I've seen her do it. Those were grain and a half phenobarbital. It doesn't take all that much to knock someone off. There was just a chance she might do it."

"You tried to kill Silvy," my mind moved sluggishly, "and got Gayle, instead."

Iona shrugged. "I hated her, you know. Gayle. I always hated her."

"And you wanted her husband, and Silvy's money . . ."

"It looked a safer bet to have Silvy committed than

to have her murdered," Iona admitted. "And now, before your friends show up downstairs, it's time to do something about you."

The fluttering sensation in my chest was no doubt only the pounding of my heart, but it seemed to be suffocating me. "How did you know I was leaving tonight? Why did you attack Eli, and shoot at me?"

"Isn't it obvious? I overheard you on the phone. As soon as you hung up, I called the cab company and cancelled the call. I didn't intend to kill you this time. I can shoot well enough to do it, if I'd wanted to. I decided it would be better, safer, to make you think Silvy was attacking you, and then you'd do the rest . . . see that she was committed. I had to make sure Eli wasn't around to let you out right away and I knew he wouldn't give up the key without telling afterward, so I way-laid him when he came out of the house . . ."

"What about Toni? What did she do to deserve to be beaten . . . ?"

She used an unprintable word. "Going to tell you all the family secrets, wasn't she? In a nice little gab-fest. You were learning too much, too fast, getting too close to David. She was a snoopy little tramp, she deserved what she got. Look, I'm ever so sorry, but we can't have an accident here in my room. You're going to have to go back to your own. You're going to have to fall out a window—the one overlooking the pool, so you'll be sure to land on the concrete. You might survive a fall onto the grass."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, too, but if you think I'm going to cooperate in any such scheme as that . . ."

I don't know where she got the knife. Maybe she'd brought it upstairs with her, suspecting that I was snooping around. Maybe it was on the dresser beside her and I hadn't noticed her pick it up while my eyes were fixed on her face.

It was a wicked blade, a hunting knife, very sharp. She held it as if she knew how to use it.

She reached behind her and opened the door, stepping aside to motion me ahead of her. I held back, unwilling to pass so close to her, although I, too, was anxious to get out of the room. I didn't see how, if she were rational at all, she could use the knife on me and expect anyone to believe it was an accident, but somehow I was not comforted by this logic.

"Go on. Move," she said, and cut the air in a motion that sent chills along my spine.

There was a welcome commotion in the lower hall; a woman's hysterical voice, several men's voices joining in. One of them rose high enough so that we could make out the words.

"She's loose, she got out of the car, but she can't get far, she can't get past the man at the gate . . ."

I watched Iona's face as the grin spread wide. Silvy was right; she wasn't the only one in the family with a touch of insanity. Madness gleamed in Iona's eyes, twisting her features until I wondered how I could have thought her beautiful.

"Silvy's loose. Oh, they'll find her, all right, like they say. Isn't it a shame that it won't be until after she's committed one more murder? With a knife she got from the archery room, maybe she had it on her all the time . . ."

I couldn't get past her into the corridor without

coming within easy reach of that gleaming blade. I was sure, now, that one of those windows opened onto a sundeck overlooking the pool side of the house. I'd rather take a chance on falling from the second floor than on a knife wielded by that muscular arm . . .

Someone . . . Emma? . . . was having such a screaming fit downstairs that I'd never make myself heard in time to get a policeman up here and it would take only one properly directed thrust with that knife . . .

I spun, rushing for the window, knowing there wasn't time to open it but hoping that if I used the heavy draperies as a shield I might have a chance of breaking through it without severing a major artery . . .

I didn't get there fast enough. I had caught the drapes and they afforded a little protection when she raised the knife, enough to entangle the blade and keep it from striking where she intended. I felt it on my upper arm yet noted no pain; I was aware only of Iona and the desperate light in her eyes.

The struggle was silent and deadly. Never before had I used every bit of strength I possessed, called upon every bit of strategy I'd ever known. I was fighting for my life, and the blood thundered in my ears so that I didn't hear the feet on the stairs or the voice shouting my name.

In what I knew was my final surge of strength I threw her back. If she came again before I could disentangle myself it would be the end of me.

She did not. I was still caught in the draperies. She, too, tripped in them as they came loose from their

traverse rod and she fell heavily backward . . . through the glass.

"Miss Dalling! Are you all right? What in heaven's name were you doing up here?"

The police officers seemed to fill the room, my vision was blurred and darkened in some strange fashion. Most of the glass had gone outward with Iona's flailing body, but there was a splinter in my cheek and I picked at it mindlessly.

One of the men stood at the window, looking out. The pool would be lit, that great ghostly green blossom flowering in the night . . .

The man's voice was flat. "Better call the ambulance back, although I think she's dead."

I turned my head. "Dead? But there's a sundeck . . ."

"Sundeck? No, ma'am, that's twenty feet to the right of here. There's just a cement and tile area at the end of the pool . . . way her head's twisted, I think she broke her neck."

"Sandi? My God, are you all right?"

I heard his voice and couldn't believe it was David . . . that he'd come home to take me away from here. I hadn't the power to walk to him, but he crossed the room in a few long strides.

"Sandi . . . Sandi . . . It was Iona, all along! Toni regained consciousness and told us, she saw Iona before she went down! It wasn't Silvy at all! And when I tried to call the house and found the line was out I was afraid . . ."

"Not Silvy," I said, my voice a croak. "Not Silvy . . ."

"I told you that all along," Silvy said from the

doorway, her grin grotesque under the flamboyant wig. "But nobody ever listens to me."

I felt David's strong arms around me and stopped trying to make my legs hold me up. I didn't need to be afraid any more . . . I thought gratefully, and closed my eyes.

Montrain has been sold, to another movie producer, and once more there will be fabulous parties there. No doubt they'll point out the spot where Iona's body lay beside the pool, and the hollow where Irene Minty was killed in place of Sandi Dalling for so capricious a whim, for so sad a reason.

I suppose they miss it bitterly, the Montrains. They are grandmother and aunt to David's children, but we do not see them. Perhaps one day we will, but I do not think so; it must be as painful for them as for us.

Silvy and Emma live in a small place overlooking the sea; we do visit them occasionally, and once in a while they come to town to shop. I've gotten used to the incredulous glances of strangers at my odd companion when we lunch together . . . Silvy in a new wig, dripping diamonds, sandaled feet below her mink.

But mostly I don't think about any of them except the Camptons. We had to settle for a house in the city; a country place was out of the question for a busy internist. It is a large house, however, an old one with plenty of room and a yard for the children. Mostly we are very happy there together, the four of us.

And when I dream again of the locked gates of

Montrain, when I wake and cry out in the night, David is there to hold and comfort me and assure me that I need never again be afraid.

I shall never forget them, the gates of Montrain, for they make all the sweeter the life I have now, the life I so nearly lost, the life that is now complete.

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House of Women

. . . but which one was the murderer? Was it Sylvie, hiding behind a mask of senility, plotting the destruction of imagined enemies? Or was it Olivia, matriarch of the family, who could see her world dissolving even as she watched? As sisters, they made a strange pair . . . but Montrain was house filled with insanity. It was not an afflictio a single generation . . . there were the twins, Iona and Iola, who did not honestly grieve th death of their sister, for it left them free to try the hand of her husband. And even the childr seemed touched by the strangeness . . . there was Vanessa, who at the age of eleven co talk calmly of death, and of suicide. Five fem players . . . and one of them guilty of at leas two murders! Would Sandi be next?

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